A spiritual journey towards participation

Participatory theatre as a platform for cultural, political and social engagement

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Introduction

The air smells like rain and wet cement on Art Island, Copenhagen, on a chilly autumn evening. Art Island is an industrial area transformed into a safe haven for artists of all sorts, such as theatre groups, musicians, and dancers. At the end of long bumpy road, and through a couple of gates, the theatre company Wunderland resides during the running of their newest show *Phoenix*. The theatre is located by a harbour overlooking the city, surrounded by woods, empty spaces, and sky-high water tanks. It feels like in the middle of nowhere, and that is exactly what it is. The surrounding is: "[…] an entrance to a world where conceptions open and multiple possibilities arise; where understanding is sensually kaleidoscopic. A place without known definitions" (Wunderland, 2015).

Wunderland is a theatre group that specializes in participatory and interactive shows. Although the Århus-based group performs all over the world, their shows are always exhibited as part of a larger art show or festivals. This means that each show becomes somewhat site-dependent, finding new ways to incorporate the environment into each show as part of the participation experience. Their newest show, *Phoenix,* builds upon the same concepts within their earlier works: participatory and interactive theatre performances. In this particular performance the audience members enter an open space one by one, every eight minutes to be exact. Each member is then lead by a white stone path and an interactive sound system that simultaneously tracks their location via GPS signals. The headphones accordingly play soundscapes composed of poetry and sounds from the harbour, engaging the audience in their current surroundings. While the sound system gives the members suggestions on what to think about during their interaction with the environment, the main purpose is just to *be.* The audience member is lead through a series of tents, where one actor is present in each tent. This one-to-one interaction makes the experience uniquely personal for a performance, but at the same time makes it difficult to document due to the inability to detach oneself from the performance and write from an objective standpoint. Hence it relies greatly on the spreadability of the medium via alternative documentation, social media promotions, trailer videos and audiences' fan labour.

Using the experiences collected from *Phoenix*, this essay will explore how participatory theatre can affect social and cultural participation within the individual, and how it can encourage them into practicing their citizenship in everyday life. It is important in media studies to examine

how the individual practices his or her citizenship in private. Media consumption has become increasingly more public, relying less and less on personal face-to-face communication. We are thus becoming more protective of our privacy as it seems to be under attack via Web 2.0. *Phoenix* allows the audience to practice their citizenship *in private.* I argue that the emotional aspect of participation has not been given enough attention while demonstrating how important individual emotions are to civic engagement, and how participatory theatre can be a platform for this sort of practice. Thus leading to an opportunity for democratic practice in a cultural context.

The changing discourse around theatregoers

1.1 The political audience

Theatre has always been a platform for political debate, from the Shakespearian theatre of the English renaissance, the *Epic Theatre* of Bertolt Brecht in the 1930s, to Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* of the 1970s (Sloman, 2011: 42-43). A lot has been written about theatre audiences, so in order to avoid old repetitions this essay focuses on how the discourse on theatre audiences has evolved through participatory theatre, and most importantly, the impact of a one-man show.

According to Richard Butsch, theatre did not enter the public sphere of Americans until the 1750s and was seen as exclusive entertainment for the privileged, being too expensive for the working class and laborers. However, after the American Revolution, around 1783, theatre became a platform for political debate, protests and riots, as artisans and lower classes were finally able to attend shows (Butsch, 2008: 23).

Not surprisingly, it was around this time that the societal view of the audience changed. Audience discourse rested on two opposite poles. The first one, a rather obvious one, perceived the audience as 'crowds' and the whole discourse surrounding that term (23-24). They were described by Carpenter in 1810 as "the young, the idle, the thoughtless and the ignorant" (24) and would thus be highly influenced by drama. It was therefore considered important for the theatre to educate the audience by teaching them the 'right' lessons, which obviously suited dominant power structures and political ideals. However, a rather revolutionary discourse described the audience as an active public, exercising their participation in society and engaging in their social citizenship. Even as early as the 1780s, theatre was an acknowledged platform for all classes to express their citizenship (25). This is a very important note that will be discussed later in this essay in relation to *Phoenix* and Dahlgren's theories on cultural citizenship.

Unfortunately, in the early 19th century, discourse that surrounded theatregoers turned negative once again. The increasing gap between the classes lead to some hysterical opinions toward lower class audiences, as Butsch mentions. They were described as "unwashed", "vile" and "uneducated" among other unpleasant names (29). However, at the same time classic crowd psychology moved away from talking about crowds as 'mobs' but rather as 'actors'. The use of 'actors' indicates that the audience could partake in the performances and have some influence over the outcome (36).

1.2 Audience power: A political struggle.

The power of the audience has become clearer in the last century. According to the community development practitioner Annie Sloman (2011: 42), theatre has for a long time been acknowledged as a useful tool for both social, political and cultural change, but it has also been used by authorities to validate existing power structures. Between 1960 and 1980, theatre was widely recognized as an important tool to decentralize current power structures where participatory practices were claimed the key approach (Chambers, 1994, cited in Sloman, 2011: 42-43). During this time participatory methods were being developed within theatre, and it was stressed that theatre should move away from government-run institutions and organizations so that the practice could become as maximalist as possible. The relationship between actor and audiences was also criticized for being dominantly one-way, so more participatory practices were suggested (Sloman, 2011: 43). Sloman (44) describes participatory theatre as a medium to engage people in critical discussion and find new ways to make a change. It can help participants to face various problems in their lives, and hopefully bring them the confidence to change their situation (45).

Former theatre movements, for example Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Brecht's *Epic Theatre,* similarly used the medium to push the audience into self-reflection and critical thinking that would eventually lead them to subverting discursive and ideological power. This could ultimately lead to social change, particularly a higher level of democratic change within political structures (42-43).

But although the concepts around participatory theatre are relatively new (45), participatory culture has been around since the mid-19th century. The early amateur media industry worked similarly as Web 2.0 does now, by amateurs publishing their own material and

circulating them on their own (Petrik, 1992, cited in Ford et al., 2013: 29). Participatory culture has the benefits of blurring the boundaries between artists and audiences, grassroots and the mainstream (Ford et al., 2013: 28-29), which is similar to what *Phoenix*, and other theatre companies, want to achieve.

It is interesting to examine what happens to the audience in *Phoenix.* During the show the audiences are mostly left all to themselves and can thus neither be considered a part of a 'crowd' nor a 'public', but as Coleman states: "crowds must be congregative, or they stop being crowds" (Coleman and Ross, 2010: 12) So the only way the audience can practice its role as an actual audience is in the occasional meetings with the actors. Apart from that, each audience member is left on its own, able to speculate on the show in piece, partake in the performance and make it their own. When the audience is participating, there is no outside spectator, no documenter, so is it even possible to say that there is an audience to the show? According to Bird (2003, cited in Livingstone, 2013), the audience is "everywhere and nowhere" (22) and thus has many identities simultaneously. We can be consumers, viewers, producers and audiences at the same time, and so it seems as if the discourse around 'crowds' and 'publics' is long past its expiration date.

Audience participation

2.1 Fan labour and passion work

One of the many perks of participatory theatre is that it forces the audience to be active. Unlike conventional theatre, which usually involves a one-way communication with the audience while it sits passively and watches the show (Sloman, 2011: 43-44).

The interaction between the actor and the audience pushes the latter into improvisation and further participation. For the show to work out as it should be the audience must be ready to participate, as it becomes obvious that the show will dissolve into nothing without participation. Even though the actors go by a script, or a certain frame while working with the audience, their encounter relies a lot on the participant's reaction which makes every meeting unique.

Similar to Hill's research on professional wrestling, the relationship between the actor and the audience in *Phoenix* can easily be described as passion work (2015). The actors are only there for the audiences and, as mentioned before, there is no show without them! The encounters with the actors are improvised, to a certain extent. The actors have a special path in mind, an ideathey want to implant into the audiences head, but the actual meeting that takes place is improvised. It involves a certain talent of acting and reacting to make up this cultural performance. Moreover,

the audience is also put in a situation where it must participate in a certain way. The actor and the audience are thus in a silent agreement on sculpting the architecture of the participation together. As in professional wrestling, this show involves different types of labour. The labor of the actors, the free fan labor of the audience that 'acts' in the play, the fans that help advertise and promote the show, and the promoters and organizers of the art festivals (Barthes, [1957] 1972, cited in Hill, 2015). Simultaneously, trust becomes vital to the show. The audience trusts the actor to fulfil their expectations of the show, while the actor trusts the audience to fulfil its role as a participant and to passionately engage with the performance. The following guestbook comment, written by an anonymous participant, clearly demonstrates the impact trust had on him/her:

> "Wauw! Moments so deeply moving. I trust you, you trust me! Life as it is supposed to be!" (Wunderland, 2015)

2.2 Dependency on spreadability

The spreadability of the show is essential because, as mentioned before, the show takes place in the private sphere between the actor and the participant. Hence it is hard to document anything that happens within the show while the performance is in session. The promotion of the show relies mostly on word-of-mouth, through social media websites such as Facebook, but also the promotion of the art show they are partaking in. The audience's immediate reaction to the performance is thus vital, particularly its reaction on social media after the show, as fans and theorists discuss and share articles on the performance. Free fan labour and their passionate engagement becomes vital for the promotion and marketing of the show (Hill, 2015). Similarly to a wrestling match, the participant soon understands the influence they can have on the show; it is participating in a "cultural performance" (Hill, 2015: 176) in collaboration with the actor, however unquestionably more private than at a wrestling match.

Richard Sennett (2008, cited in Ford et al., 2013: 58) argues that free fan labour should not only be understood in relation to economic factors, as labour can be paid in various ways – for example in emotional value. The audience gets paid in pride, recognition and reputation, not to mention the joy of creation. The audience is knowingly being exploited by the industry, the sponsors and the promoters but whilst enjoying themselves (Ford et al., 2013: 60).

The show is obviously very personal for the audience, as it is constructed around the individual's emotional life and personal feelings. On Wunderland's website they state that they stress the personal experiences accumulated between the actors and the audience. They want to

create a new state of mind, made clear only through the relationship they create together (Wunderland, 2012).

Flourish Klink states that: "[…] when you love a story, you feel like it is *your* story. That's a good thing. If you didn't feel that way, you obviously wouldn't care very much about the story." (Klink, 2011, cited in Ford et al., 2013: 60-61). The audience enjoys participating as it has the chance to make the show their own personal experience. By the same token, Hansen, a writer and editor of the cultural web magazine *Netudgaven*, describes how conventional theatre is not doing enough for the audience anymore. It is becoming increasingly more crucial to engage the audience and fulfil its desire for authentic products. The audience wants to be present in the project, both mentally and physically. And this demands a lot from the promoters and the actors of the show, because if it is not achieved in the right way, it will unveil its *staged* participation (Hansen, 2015).

2.3 The risk of pseudo experiences

The participation in *Phoenix* is obvious at first sight, but to what extent? Maximalist participatory theatre sounds good on paper, and Hermes (2005: 4) argues that the way to reach happiness for all, a complete democracy, society should maximize its participation and minimize the rules to do it. Maximalist participation should practice engagement in every day society. However, this utopian approach to participation is not always useful. In an article by Hansen (Hansen, 2015) she praises *Phoenix* for its success as a participatory theatre but simultaneously discusses how participatory theatre, when it is not done right, can lose its value. The maximalist approach to theatre is very fragile and a lot of the time overrated in this context. When amateurs are put in the role of actors, directors and viewers all at the same time it can undermine the work that the professionals have put in, and thus the concept that the group is trying to convey falls flat due to amateurism. "The theatre has here been populated by us amateurs, but without the benefit of the story and without strengthening the identification."[1] (Hansen, 2015).

As mentioned before, there has to be some structure to the participation for it to work. It is *staged participation* that relies highly on its participatory design. Hansen argues that participatory theatre is always a game, no matter if the actor is put in the audiences' place and vice versa. There is always a 'stage' of some sort, and there is always the 'floor'. There is always a set of

[1] Translated from Danish: "Teatret er her blevet befolket af os, amatørene, men uden at gavne fortællingen og uden at styrke identifikationen."

rules, an underlying respect among participants, even though they become more obscure and challenged in participatory theatre (ibid.).

2.4 When the curtains close

Participation never happens in a vacuum and the audience is always participating in *something* and with *someone* (Livingstone, 2013: 24). One could describe the participation in the actual show as *private* and both *active* and *reactive* (Olsson, 2012: 51). The show happens in a secluded area, and as mentioned before, is difficult to document while it is in action. The audience is given a ready-made material, but it is able to play with it, and contribute to it. However, what happens when the audience steps out of the stage is a different story. There aren't any platforms available to the audience after the show to express and discuss their opinion, unless on the group's Facebook page, which can only be described as a *promoted* participation and only *reactive* (ibid.). The editor of the Facebook page also gets to decide whether a comment will be published or even if they want to delete it. So the issue with the physicality of the show is that unless the audience decides to blog about it, write an article or leave a very generous comment on their Facebook page, it is pretty hard to promote and can easily disappear.

2.5 A 'DIY' approach to emotional commitment

The physical space plays a big role in the show, but one cannot ignore the benefits of modern technology and Web 2.0 in this context, which benefitted the show greatly surrounding the spreadability and promotion of it. The participation that the audience is used to from the virtual Web 2.0 format is recreated for them in the physical space of the show.

However, the physicality of the show makes the experience more personal than the internet could ever be. So it is this mix between the audience's demand to be able to control and produce their own material, but whilst being present in the open world, communicating face-to-face with the actors. According to Dahlgren (2009, cited in Miegel, 2013: 9), face-to-face interaction in a physical space plays a crucial role in communication among individuals. It creates a platform for them to express themselves and simultaneously engage in a social debate.

> "Phoenix is a huge hug to human touch - the touch I miss everyday day (....) today I went into the dark, and it made me see. Thank you! Heart emoticon" (Wunderland, 2015).

In this anonymous comment from the *Phoenix* guestbook, the participant is clearly happy with the intimacy of the show. One cannot really describe Web 2.0 as a necessarily personal platform,

and even though it opens up an incredible amount of communication and spreadabilty of content, there is nothing that comes close to a human touch. Hansen (2015) stresses that "[…] it is possible to see these theatre formats in the light of technological developments"[2]

Phoenix wants to focus on the personal connection between individuals in society and how they can create and shape that in a staged environment so the overall results are lasting and authentic. Similarly, Parker (2010, cited in Gauntlett, 2011) states that the act of creating something, and see something actualized, can have a self-reflexive affect and alter the "sense of self" (67). This self-realization is what *Phoenix* wants to nurture, through creativity, communication and participation.

Practising citizenship

3.1 A crash-course in citizenship

The architecture of the show pushes the audience into participation and to practice their cultural citizenship. Joke Hermes mentions in relation to popular culture that it makes the audience feel like an integral part of a community. It makes participation more welcoming, knowing that one is a part of a community, even though they aren't aware of it. They know and feel the shared authentic interest, or the same subcultural entity (2005: 3). The same thing can be said about *Phoenix*, it is quite magical what happens when the audience becomes aware that there is another individual 8 minutes ahead of them, and another 8 minutes behind them, following their footsteps. It binds the whole show together, because even though the experience is meant to be personal, the audiences can feel the sense of mystic connectivity.

Dahlgren (2009: 69) states that civil society can be a workshop for citizens to practice their political and social citizenship. It nurtures the citizen and encourages it to participate in society. One could think of this art show as a microcosm of society, where citizens get to practice their citizenship. Sloman describes participatory theatre as something made exclusively *for* and *by* the citizens, "It engages people to identify issues of concern, analyse and then together think about how change can happen, and particularly how relationships of power and oppression can be transformed" (2011: 44). Finally, they are taught how valuable their role in society is, and that their opinion and actions matter, which could lead to their social development, shape their identities and strengthen their sense of self (Dahlgren, 2009: 69). Furthermore, civil society can serve as a sphere for social unity with complete democracy as the ultimate goal (Alexander, 2006,

[2] Translated from Danish: "[…] det er muligt at se disse teaterformater i lyset af den teknologiske udvikling."

cited in Dahlgren, 2011: 70). According to the philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, participatory theatre is "based on a dialogue that [can] lead to an ongoing process of reflection, followed by action" (Thyagarajan, 2002, cited in Sloman, 2011: 44).

Phoenix draws all the citizens' potential into broad daylight and the audience is able to see how valuable they are. Wolin calls this realization an "outburst of intense affective engagement" (Wolin, 1996, cited in Dahlgren, 2011:71) which gives the audience the extra push into democratic participation. However, the push is not sufficient on its own as civic participation is a learning process; one needs to make mistakes and act accordingly (Dahlgren, 2011: 71).

3.2 The ashes of discursive power

The discourse around participatory theatre has usually been highly political. It has served a great deal as a weapon to decentralize power structures and make the audience and participants aware of their repression and dominating ideology. However, *Phoenix* does not seem to have this obvious political agenda like their predecessors. Wunderland doesn't have any political statements or manifestos like a lot of its predecessors, but they stress the emotional impact they want to have on the individual to perceive its nature, surroundings and senses differently.

The literal sense of the name of the show, *Phoenix*, gives clues into the shows true meaning. The Phoenix is a mythological bird that is reborn from its ashes. It is meant to illustrate the metamorphic quality the show can have on the individual. It is given the opportunity to drop all pre-existing ideas and logics and surrender itself to the Phoenix. If the process is successful, the audience is able to dissolve its ego and be born again, from its ashes (Smidl, 2015).

> "When art makes us see life. THANK YOU SO MUCH!"
> (Wunderland: 2015)

It is hard to disconnect participatory theatre from its political and ideological roots and as Carpentier mentions, participation is always connected with power in some way – politically or ideologically (2011: 10). One could say that the one of the many intentions behind *Phoenix* was to let the audience come face – to – face with what Carpentier calls discursive power (141). From the ashes of former ideology awakes new awareness.

Before the show started, the audience was given some time alone where it had to fill out a questionnaire. The questions asked made little logical sense, as did the answers.[3] It demanded

[3] One question being for example: "Are you afraid of heights?" and the only given answers being "(don't be) / (don't be)."

them to think about logical things differently and exposed the dominant ideology they encounter in everyday life. It can described as a crash-course in distancing yourself from ideological discourse. As Althusser mentions: "Through the logics of interpellation, ideology offers over-determined frameworks of knowledge that allow subjects (actively) to make sense of the social while, at the same time, pre-structuring the social and excluding other frameworks" (Althusser, 1990, cited in Carpentier, 2011: 141). It gives the audience the chance to question not only obvious systemic power but also discursive power.

3.3 The importance of emotions

Phoenix wants to focus on the individual, focusing on value and as a citizen. Both through emotions, individual thought, but also practice and confrontation of the *self* through the actors. As mentioned before, trust is important for democratic citizenship, but trust for the authorities is not sufficient. The trust among citizens is highly important as well (Dahlgren and Olsson, 2007, cited in Miegel, 2013: 8). Through trust, communication is attained. According to Miegel (2013), discussion among citizens plays an important role in practicing citizenship. It is important that they have a platform where they feel that their opinions are valued. And even though *Phoenix* is a rather small platform, and also quite obscure, it is an important tool for communication and debate. It is important that participants in society, as in *Phoenix*, feel the importance of their existence, both as individuals and as citizens in society (9).

Participation in society doesn't only happen in parliament, it happens on the street, on cafés, through discussions and emotions. People take irrational and emotional decisions all the time, and one cannot undermine that. In *Phoenix*, emotions are all there is. The importance is all on the *feeling* and *impulse* people face when thrown into emotional and spiritual participation like this show is. Those impulses often weigh much more among citizens than rational thought, even though engaging with political, moral or ideological issues (Rorty, 1989, Taylor, 1989, cited in Miegel, 2013: 10). Emotions are often perceived as something that does not belong in professional debate. However, citizens are human beings, and are not going to think objectively about their own lives any time soon. Passion becomes just as important in this context as anything else.

This essay has before stressed the importance of passion in relation to fan-labour but it is also important to acknowledge how passion can be used in relation to citizenship. In fact,

Dahlgren argues that passion plays a major role in engaging citizens to participate in society (Dahlgren, 2009, cited in Miegel, 2013: 11). Because in the end, citizenship comes down to communication among individuals, which will not happen if the passion isn't there (ibid). *Phoenix* embraces passion and emotions and gives the audience the strength and wings to understand them and use to its benefit. In the end, communication researchers need to include the chaotic and haphazardly emotional life of the individual, even though it is hard to pin down to a diagram. Because in the end, there is no motivation for participation if the passion is not there.

Conclusion

For a long time academics have tried to understand *why* people participate and *what* engages them to do it. However, the biggest flaw in that discussion is that citizens are often represented as statistics in a diagram but not the sentimental beings they are. There are countless factors involved in their lack or abundance of participation. It is thus important to stress how individual emotions come into practise to civic engagement. Emotional value has not been given enough credit.

Phoenix relies a lot on fan labour that stems from the passion work of the audience. The actor and the participant enter a silent agreement of equal participation to make the show fulfil its role. One could call the audiences role free fan labour, as they do not get paid for their participation, and even have to pay for it, but in this case they get paid in the deeply personal experience made especially for them.

However, the problem with the emotional and *private* experience *Phoenix* wants to create is that it has a hard time spreading. The only platforms available to discuss the show afterwards is on Facebook, which is a very one-dimensional interaction, unless the participant starts their own forum, discussion or perhaps writes a critique. What needs to be done is to make a platform for the audience to engage in afterwards to follow the participation through.

Of course, some topics have yet to be discussed, for example how participatory theatre isn't available to everybody. By staying out of the mainstream, it is quite obscure and not so accessible. There is also the factor that not every citizen feels comfortable stepping out of the comfort-zone to a small, highly personal theatre show like this, no matter how approachable *Phoenix* wants to be. As said before, it all comes down to the passion of citizens, and passion can never be documented via a diagram.

Participatory theatre is a golden platform for emotional participation. However, it is important to discuss *what* kind of participation is appropriate for this context. It is often stressed that maximalist participation is the best way to serve democracy but in this situation, maximalist participation can make the whole factor very fragile. To put participatory theatre in the hands of amateurs can render the show completely useless. It is the emotional impact that *Phoenix* wants to make and hence it needs to be (at least to some extent) in the hands of professionals who know how to work with audience. That way, not only will the actors gain free labour from the audience, but the audience gets the most out of the experience, physically and mentally. This relationship, which hopefully stays strong after the show, can then further influence other shows, other theatre groups and other participants to attend shows like this. Which will, when it all comes together, lead to further participation of citizens in society as well.

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