

Report SIMM Seminar 6 on Participatory Opera and Musical Theatre Barcelona, Liceu, 12-14, June 2023

The seminar was prepared by the facilitators Lukas Pairon, Imogen Flower, and Graça Mota with the assistance of Irene Calvis as the main organiser from El Liceu, Barcelona.

Participants:

Marie-Paule Dasque, France
Guy Harries, UK
Thalia Kellmeyer, Germany
Maria Peres, Portugal
Iris Skolidi, Greece
Sarah Thery, France/Belgium
Liisamaija Hautsalo, Finland
Ana Čoric, Croatia
Lotte Suve, Belgium

Nil Baruten, Barcelona, invited as Evaluator of the program and Ester Bonal, invited as animator

An overall account of the issues raised, either in whole group or small group work, as an important source of thinking in terms of the next seminar on participatory Opera and Musical Theatre to take place in London, 2024.

Large or small scale – what does this mean?

- This could mean the number of participants and the type of involvement
- The time-scale: One-off or continuous
- Who the stakeholders are: State-financed theatres or independent projects
- Resources: Time, money, labour required to make it happen (including that of 'participants'!)
- Institutional vs Non-institutional
- Impact is not necessarily in direct correlation with size
- Money is also not necessarily in direct correlation with size, as even the big institutions have to fundraise

Institutions

- Do opera singers have a place in participatory opera productions?
 - o If everything is being outsourced, what is the purpose of bringing participatory productions to opera houses?
 - o Might need specific practitioners for participatory opera productions to avoid clashes of expectations and aesthetics
 - o Difficult to combine a career of professional performance with community projects sustainably
- Opera house as a 'mammoth with rheumatism'

- Questions for opera houses wanting to host community projects:
 - o Why would they want to finance a community project?
 - o What is the level of commitment? Why do institutions decide to run these projects? These decisions need to have reach throughout all the institution
 - o Is it going to be on the main programme?
 - o Is it now an intrinsic part of the programme or does it just happen once?
Community projects need to become part of the institution, engrained in case power changes hands and they are no longer prioritised
 - o Community projects could bring in new audiences to opera houses, but how open/closed is this space to the public generally?
- Can institutions democratise their decision-making processes, like Red Hat (Guy) and Freiberg (Thalia)?
- Make sure projects are accessible, e.g. scheduling around working hours, larger scores for visually impaired or elderly people

Role of composers, performers and designers

- Different working with a group that is already mobilised than a group that is not
- Sarah's 'manifesto'
 - o Be aware of cultural colonialism
 - o Prioritise dialogue
 - o It is like building a house, everyone brings their own set of competencies
 - o Enjoy and learn from the process
 - o Not giving a voice, but broadcasting/platforming them
- The pressure of needing a product. How does this affect the process and the nature of participation?
- Discussion:
 - o How can ideals of the 'manifesto' come into reality? How does it work within the reality of institutions? Does the fact people are coming with different competencies create hierarchies that disrupt ideal non-hierarchical structure?
 - o Could there be specific training (e.g. within conservatoires) for participatory opera/musical theatre practitioners?

Communities

- Bridge-building is necessary within and through projects
- Participation can be active or passive, on-stage and off-stage
- How do we think about the participation of the person who initiates the project?

Relationship between research and practice

- Action research: Start with community dialogue
- Do we follow the interests of the people involved? Both in creative and research processes?
- Consider scientific literature about community processes. Read interdisciplinary literature

- Include practitioner perspectives
- Final findings need to be shared with the people involved
- Time-frame: Research takes a long time and once it's produced it might not seem relevant to practice anymore, but it can still inform future projects down the line
- Research can identify consistency/gaps between aims and methods; help projects move towards sustainable practices; build arguments for funding, recognition etc; support the development of practice
- Keep asking who the research is for. It's important it involves, and is relevant to, participants
- How do you make your methods inclusive?
- How do you share results?

Participatory musical theatre and social justice

- Includes ideologies that might be imposed
- Risks of harm vs. benefits
 - o Do you create a sense of lack by bringing something new?
 - o Is there a risk of opening up a window of possibility and then closing it?
 - o Things that might seem liberatory can have serious repercussions
- Conflicts of values and ideologies depending on stakeholders
- Where are the ideological limits and agreed upon practices? Do these need to be defined collectively?
- Working with children: Possibility of clashes with parents; What are the bureaucratic responsibilities, e.g. if a child arrives without their permission slip
- Culture as a human right: Access to culture (Passive) and access to opportunities to create (Active)
- Involving personal stories: Considering issues of anonymity and protection, the right to withdraw consent etc
- Does receiving money from the state mean you are answerable to society? What does this mean?
- Discounting tickets increases and normalises access to cultural productions and spaces
- What use do certain labels serve? E.g. of certain 'communities'
 - o Do they impose narratives, topics or agendas?
 - o Do they come from partner organisations, e.g. service providers?

Payment

- Payment to participants
 - o 'Volunteer payment'
 - o Paying people in research: Take account of their time, their knowledge, and their socioeconomic situation
- Why are soloists paid more?
 - o 'More skilled'?
 - o 'Experiential value'?

- How are amateur organisations paid?
- Is time/labour fairly compensated?

Preparations for practitioners and researchers

- Not just a way of doing, but a way of being
- Make time for contemplation, reflection and rest
- Learn to control impulses
- Create an environment of listening, leaving noise from the outside world behind
- Playfulness rather than productivity. Nurture a sense of safety and trust
- Let go of plans
- Look at previous evaluations
- Find a balance between taking responsibility and sharing it
- Find a connection with participants prior to beginning a project
- Introduce participants to the policy behind the project
- Give a good introduction to the space and codes, e.g. a guided tour
- Make a timeline, an overview for specific days
- Define your values and stick to them
- Communicate what you are doing very clearly: Purpose, actions, outputs
- Prepare to document the process and have methods in place for keeping track of what you have done
- Make sure you have the necessary resources before you start

Future for the SIMM Seminar on Participatory Opera

- Attendees to be external eyes for each other
- Connect through shared experiences of working within institutions
- Put together an accessible report, perhaps on the SIMM website
- An online meeting in Autumn
- Set up an online shared folder for sharing papers, new writing etc
- Document everything
- Next time schedule an extra day for collating notes and documenting the conversations collectively
- Would be helpful to have a shared case study to reflect on together, so we are not speaking in the abstract
- Finding ways of sharing knowledge outside of academia, e.g. cultural institutions, higher education, etc...

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