

This article presents the Project on European Theatre Systems (STEP) and its most recent research into the theatre lives of smaller European cities. It situates STEP's research in the tradition of sociological, philosophical and psychological inquiry into the arts' function within society and, in particular, into audience research. It explains, however, the particular benefits of STEP's approach and methodologies: that they enable international comparison and shift attention from the extraordinary performances favoured by theatre scholars to the ordinary ones that contribute to the bulk of spectators' experiences of theatre. The article explains the methods of the *STEP City Study* and surveys how its results will be presented in the rest of this special issue.

Keywords:

theatre audience, reception research, international comparative theatre survey, STEP, arts policy, theatre sociology

STEP into the Provinces: The theatre systems and audience experiences of smaller European cities

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Introduction

The research that underpins the articles in this special issue has two key aims: first, to help build an understanding of how theatre functions in society; and second, to better describe the relationship between these functions and the ways in which the theatrical field is organised within each society. It addresses these aims through a broad-based, comparative study of the theatre lives of seven smaller European cities. Through the use of a data set that we believe to be unparalleled in its focus and scope, this research can make a unique contribution to our understanding of the social functions of theatre.

While we claim that our methods and results are unique, we acknowledge that this inquiry stands in a long line of similar efforts. Over the centuries, making sense of the relationship between the arts and society has been a central concern of philosophers and artists. A recent and remarkably comprehensive overview of this collection of arguments has been provided by Eleonora Belfiore and Oliver Bennett (*The Social Impact of the Arts*). Particularly after World War II, a number of investigations were conducted to find some evidence to explain the functioning of theatre. We can distinguish between two distinct threads in this research: first, the audience research grounded in demographics and sociology; and second, the more psychologically-based reception research.¹

The first approach, which has been used for the purposes of both academic research and marketing, has attempted to map the numbers and backgrounds of audiences for theatre in general and for particular types, and has been quite successful in doing so. Age groups, educational levels, financial backgrounds and gender are some of the key factors that have been linked to theatre attendance.

¹ For a more detailed overview see Sauter and Martin, *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*, Sauter, "Who Reacts When, How and upon What: From Audience Surveys to the Theatrical Event", Schoenmakers and Tulloch, "From Audience Research to the Study of Theatrical Events: a Shift in Focus" and Tulloch, *Shakespeare and Chekhov in Production and Reception: Theatrical Events and their Audiences*.

For instance, it has been demonstrated in many cases that women attend theatre more often than men and that the higher a person's education level is, the more likely he/she is to attend the theatre, especially subsidised performance.² This last observation can be linked to the growth of subsidy systems for the arts (including theatre) in Europe since World War II, which allowed artists to take the opportunity to free themselves somewhat from the demands of the market to develop their own more autonomous aesthetic languages (see Van Maanen and Wilmer, *Theatre Worlds in Motion: Structures, Politics and Developments in the Countries of Western Europe*).

The second, psychologically-oriented research looked into the specifics of the experiences spectators had during theatrical events. This approach was able to incorporate a wider range of qualitative methods of research than would be possible within the former approach. It uses a variety of research methods, from participant observation, to questionnaires and interviews of all kinds, to the use of brain scans during a spectator's watching of a performance based on current theories of mirror neural pathways (for a good example of the last of these, see Reason et al., "Researching Dance"). These varying efforts have led to interesting case studies but few broader generalisations,³ making it clear that investigating spectator experiences is an ongoing project that will reward further effort.

The group of scholars active in the International Federation for Theatre Research's working group on audience and reception during the 1980s was fully aware of the necessity to bring sociological and psychological questions and data together and tried to do this in several collections of articles based on empirical data. Unfortunately, the two approaches often remained separated into individually written articles. While each of these approaches is interesting in its own right, scholars have not yet fully brought these two approaches together into a general theory of audience and reception (cf. Schoenmakers, *Performance Theory: Advances*, Sauter, *New Directions*, and Schoenmakers, ed. *Performance Theory, Reception*).

As Susan Bennett demonstrated in her much-cited book *Theatre Audiences*, it is interesting and useful to bring audience research and reception research together in order to address the question of how theatre functions in society. And indeed, in addition to presenting the results of large-scale audience research

2 Anne-Marie Gourdon can be seen as an important founder of this approach with her *Théâtre, public, perception*.

3 A number of other disciplines have developed their interest in what artistic consumers expect and experience in their interaction with the artwork. Marketing has a particularly important literature in this area. For an overview, see Joostens (*Kunst en Klant in de Nederlandse Podiumkunsten*) which draws on the work of, amongst others, Harrison and Shaw ("Consumer Satisfaction"), Hume et al. ("Understanding Service Experience"), Lee ("When Arts Met Marketing"), Rentschler ("Museum and Performing Arts Marketing"), ("Museum and Performing Arts Marketing: The Age of Discovery") and Boorsma (*Kunstmarketing*).

programmes (among others by Baumol and Bowen, *Performing Arts*, Throsby and Withers, *The Economics*) she provides the reader with some ideas on how to bridge the gap between theatre production, audience composition and theatre reception on a conceptual and societal level. The most important insight in this respect is the observation that each encounter between a theatre production and an audience takes place in a well-determined cultural environment, which influences the experiences of the spectators to a very large extent. To indicate this cultural structure of the encounter Susan Bennett used the term “theatrical event”. This term was elaborated and used more thoroughly as a fundamental concept by the Theatrical Event working group of the IFTR, established in 1997 under the leadership of Willmar Sauter.⁴

In the work of Sauter and the group, a theatrical event is a culturally determined situation in which theatrical communication takes place. The concept clarifies that although, in the terms of Bernard Beckerman (*Dynamics of Drama*), this communication is “isolated in time and space”, this isolation is a relative one as each communication takes place under a set of conventions and conditions including the perceptual schemata of the spectators, the (organisational) character of the event as a whole and, of course, the type of performance at hand. All of these components are, of course, influenced by the cultural history of the society concerned, and while they do change, they have some level of temporal stability. In this sense, the concept of the theatrical event makes it possible to think about the functioning of theatre in a society in terms of the typical values (or experiences) that can be and are realised under these three conditional factors. This approach is an important precursor to our work here. It is, however, largely put forward in the form of the theoretical analysis and the examination of case studies. Our approach aims to use quantitative data to broaden the focus in order to examine theatre systems at the level of a city, rather than individual productions or artists. We hope this will allow us to better understand the workings of theatre as a social system.

Project on European Theatre Systems (STEP)

The research presented in this special issue is the outcome of the most recent work of the Project on European Theatre Systems, known by its reverse acronym, STEP. STEP is a group of sociologically-minded theatre scholars who work in seven smaller European countries. Each of us has expertise in the theatre of

⁴ Amongst others, the Theatrical Event working group included some of the same scholars who were active in the earlier IFTR working group on audience and reception research, as well as some of the founders of the future STEP project. For more details, see Cremona et al. (*Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics and Frames*) as well as Sauter (*The Theatrical Event*).

the nation in which we live and work, both in the theatre it produces and in the theatre system's organisational structure. The group was founded in 2005 under the leadership of Hans van Maanen of the University of Groningen, Netherlands and Andreas Kotte of the University of Bern, Switzerland. From the beginning, the group has been committed to the comparative analysis of European theatre systems. The group published its first book in 2009 under the title *Global Changes-Local Stages: How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries* (Van Maanen, Kotte and Saro, eds.). The overarching research question of that book, and of STEP's work since that time, has been: "How do various theatre systems and their contexts support the functioning of theatre in their respective societies?" (*Global Changes* 9). In 18 chapters, the book describes structural differences in theatre systems alongside their developments and questions of national identity, issues of value and structure in theatre politics, and the different ways in which these systems, large and small, were brought to bear on practical questions such as journalistic practice, theatre architecture and the cultural reconstruction of Eastern Europe after 1989.

While the research contained in that collection was important and useful, the chapters were relatively disconnected. It became clear that in order to better address STEP's central research question, the group's next effort would need to be a more focused and coordinated effort, one that would be able to bridge two gaps: first, the gap between audience research and reception research, and second, the gap between the generation of over-general conceptual insights on the one hand and particular analyses which resist generalisation on the other. More precisely, to deliver adequately comprehensive theoretical insights without abandoning a grounding in empirical data, STEP's next research project would focus on the following five goals:

1. to describe each theatre system:⁵ the organisation of theatre production, distribution and reception in the cultural context of the various countries;
2. to map which people make use of which types of theatre;
3. to formulate what different types of theatre *do* to the people who make use of them, that is, what spectators experience and how they make use of these possibilities;
4. to question how these experiences and uses can be connected to the ways in which the production, distribution and reception are organised; and

⁵ The term "system" here is not used in a directly Luhmannian sense, but in a broader way to refer to the organisation of the production, distribution and reception of theatre. Bourdieu might have used the term "field" in the same sense. We consider theatre supply and use as outcomes of the system.

5. to make comparisons on these four categories between the countries participating in the research.

The STEP City Study

To serve these goals, STEP set up its *City Study* in 2009. This project focuses on drawing as complete as possible a portrait of the theatre lives of seven smaller cities around Europe. For the most part, the cities we have chosen for the study resemble one another. They are all of the a comparable magnitude of size, between 100,000 and 300,000 residents. All of them are geographically and culturally distant from the national capital.⁶ Many have a university (or two) that serves as a hub of the local economy and culture. Of course, each of these cities is distinct, and holds a particular relationship to the theatrical capital, but comparisons can still be usefully made. The project used parallel methods in each city to facilitate comparison, to the extent possible. The seven cities examined were:

- Aarhus, Denmark (pop. 250,000)
- Bern, Switzerland (pop. 123,000)
- Debrecen, Hungary (pop. 208,000)
- Groningen, the Netherlands (pop. 198,000)
- Maribor, Slovenia (pop. 95,000)
- Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom (pop. 279,000)⁷
- Tartu, Estonia (pop. 98,000)

With the notable exception of Southern Europe, these represent a reasonable cross-section of regional cities around Europe. While we cannot demonstrate it, we have no reason to think that our data would be unrepresentative of similarly sized cities across Europe.

The choice to focus on the theatre lives of smaller cities has a number of specific advantages. First, it allows for a level of comprehensiveness that would not be possible in the capitals or at the level of countries as a whole. It was simply not possible in larger places to collect the level of data that we aimed for without significant gaps. By choosing to focus on smaller cities, we were able to capture

⁶ The one exception to this is Bern, Switzerland. While Bern is the political capital of Switzerland, it is far from the country's cultural capital. German-speaking Bern looks to Zurich as its cultural capital. To some extent, Geneva fills that role for the Francophone part of Switzerland.

⁷ Newcastle is something of an outlier on this list. For funding reasons, the research on Newcastle specifically included the surrounding area, known as Tyneside, which has a population of about three times that of Newcastle proper. Also, each of the other cities represents a country covered in the 2009 STEP book. Again for funding reasons, it was not possible to research a city in Ireland, thus Newcastle was selected as an (imperfect but similar) replacement.

a much better sample of the full breadth of theatre life. We were able to draw a portrait that included all – or nearly all – of the important venues, companies and forms of theatre work present in each city.

Furthermore, our focus on smaller cities shifts our focus away from the extraordinary, innovative and international productions that receive the lion's share of attention from theatre scholars and critics towards the less celebrated examples of performance that make up the bulk of theatre in most countries. Theatre capitals – Budapest, London, Amsterdam, Zurich and so on – have different theatre lives than regional centres such as the cities we are considering here. While those interested in the development of theatre aesthetics understandably focus their attention on theatre capitals, that is not our aim here. Our focus on smaller cities does not just enable us to address a larger portion of the theatre world, but brings us closer to the experience that most spectators have of theatre, and thus enables us to say more about the role that the practice of theatre-going plays in the wider theatre audience and society. Finally, it helps us talk about those sorts of theatre which, because they are not generally seen as aesthetically innovative, often escape the notice of theatre scholars. Such examples, however, make up the bulk of theatre experiences and thus necessarily form the basis for a proper analysis of the social role of theatre.

This approach, of course, also facilitates certain research questions more than it does others. We are better able to talk about the relationship that society develops with theatre as an institution, rather than with individual productions. This often includes amateur and commercial theatre, rather than subsidised work alone. Because we are describing such a large number of productions, we are able to bracket out questions of artistic quality in ways that may seem counterintuitive but can be very useful in describing the systems in which all theatre is necessarily created and made meaningful. We are also able to make comparisons – between cities, between genres, between audience demographic groups, between different years – that other approaches might find more difficult. These questions will be of relevance to those with an interest in the sociology of the arts, of course, but they have other uses as well. They will provide a useful background for scholars who wish to compare individual theatrical works to the norms and expectations of their industry, as well as for scholars of and experts in arts policy and subsidy, whether at a national, local or institutional level.

The research presented in this special issue is the result of a group effort. The researchers who have contributed to the project are: Magdolna Balkányi (University of Debrecen, Hungary); Mathias P. Bremgartner (University of Bern, Switzerland); Joshua Edelman (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK); Frank

Gerber (University of Bern, Switzerland); Louise Ejgod Hansen (University of Aarhus, Denmark); Anne-Lotte Heijink (University of Groningen, Netherlands); Andreas Kotte (University of Bern, Switzerland); Ksenija Repina Kramberger (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia); Anneli Saro (University of Tartu, Estonia); Beate Schappach (University of Bern, Switzerland); Maja Šorli (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia); Attila Szabó (University of Debrecen, Hungary); Hedi-Liis Toome (University of Tartu, Estonia); Quirijn Lennert van den Hoogen (University of Groningen, Netherlands); Hans van Maanen (University of Groningen, Netherlands); Marline Lisette Wilders (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands); Stephen Wilmer (Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland); and Antine Zijlstra (University of Groningen, Netherlands).

Research design and methods

In order to compare the systems of these cities and their functioning, we have collected three forms of data. As each city's research project was conducted by local researchers with local resources, it was not possible to collect all three types of data for all seven cities. Given this constraint, however, we used identical methods in each city's project in order to make the data collected as consistent and comparable as possible. This section sets out the three forms of data gathered and our methods in doing so.

The first set of data was a count of the total supply of theatrical performances offered to the public in each city over a certain period of time (normally one year). These data aimed to capture a complete list of all performances offered to the general public during one full year. This included theatre in its broadest sense, including Spoken Theatre, Dance, Puppet and Object Theatre, Opera, Musical, *Cirque Nouveau*, so-called *Kleinkunst* and so on. This issue's article describing audience experiences of different types and genres expands on the definitions and limits of these terms. Importantly, we did not count so-called "closed" presentations which were not offered to the general public.⁸ Our categories were designed to help us better describe each city's theatre supply and to differentiate between the ways each city organised that supply. For each production, then, we attempted to gather the following data:

- Organising venue
- Subsidy (State, regional, local, none)
- Organisation (large or small institution, free group, commercial producer)

⁸ In particular, we did not include performances staged within schools exclusively for the students of that school. We hypothesise that there may, in fact, be a considerable number of these closed children's performances, and thus children may actually have more opportunities to experience theatre than our data might suggest.

- Name of company
- Venue-company relationship (house company, house production, touring production, co-production, (regular) guest production, etc.)
- Name of production
- Number of performances of the production in the season
- Number of visits per production in the season
- Place of presentation
- Period of presentation in the season
- Total period of presentation
- Type of theatre (Spoken Theatre, Dance, Musical Theatre, etc.)
- Genre (subtype)
- Part of a festival (yes/no)
- Audience target group: adult, youth (13-17), children (0-12); specific: elderly, ethnic, etc.
- Professionalism of production (professional, amateur, semi-professional)
- Time of original creation (classic, modern, contemporary, new)
- Adaptation (of a book, of a film, not an adaptation)
- Name of creator (author)
- Nationality of creator

Based on this data set, a complete picture of the theatre supply in the participating cities could be drawn. This would include the numbers and types of productions, the level of professionalism, the spaces used and so on. One could also cross-reference these data, for instance, between target groups and rate of professionalism; venues and subsidies; number of visits and genre and so on. We collected the data through data requests with theatre companies and national statistics bodies, surveys of websites and programmes, and direct inquiries.

The second data set concerns the spectators who attended these performances. These data stand in the grand tradition of sociological audience research. Our data aims to characterise those who attend theatre, both in terms of their demographics (age, gender, education, etc.) and in terms of their relationship with theatre, such as which theatres they attended, how often, which genres they preferred and so on. To collect this data set, we selected a number of productions in each city which could be considered representative for the supply as a whole. The spectators of the performances of these productions were approached by researchers in the lobby and asked to fill out a small card or share their email

address to permit the research team to send them a full questionnaire by email.⁹ The electronically returned questionnaires were automatically processed and analysed by means of software packages commonly used for statistical analysis. These data delivered insights into the composition of different audiences and enabled us to calculate how many inhabitants of a city actually make use of (which parts of) the theatre supply and how often they do so, by genre and by venue.

However, to better understand how theatrical events in fact function for the public, or, in other words, what performances in fact do with and for attendees, we required a third data set. These were collected via the same questionnaire, which included a number of questions about how audience members experienced the performances they saw, and how they valued them. These questions largely asked spectators to agree or disagree with a descriptive statement about the performance, or to what extent each of a list of adjectives (keywords) characterised their experience of a performance. These data, too, were compiled by our software and analysed.

It is quite rare to investigate experience through quantitative methods. What made it possible and attractive for this project was the strong cooperation between researchers and the large number of surveys comparable between several cities. The questions on the survey were discussed, debated and agreed on by the STEP research team as a whole, and thus identical questions were used in every city.¹⁰ By using these methods, it was possible to observe and quantify similarities and differences between audience groups, between cities and between genres.

But in order to fill out our understanding of how spectators value theatre and connect it to the values of their lives in general, most of the research teams supplemented the quantitative analysis of audience experience with qualitative research by means of focus groups and individual interviews. In Groningen and Tartu, the focus groups and individual interviews were conducted a few days after the performance. In Tyneside (and also in Aarhus, although not included in this data set), we used the theatre talks model adopted in Denmark by STEP member Louise Ejgod Hansen ("The Democratic Potential"), in which a group of spectators attend a series of performances and afterwards lead their own discussions of their experience of them. Theatre talks were originally conducted by Willmar Sauter, Curt Isaksson, Lisbeth Jansson (see Hansen). We have used these qualitative techniques to help us interpret the quantitative data and better

⁹ Printed surveys were also provided for those who did not wish to use email. These surveys were entered into the electronic system manually by the research team.

¹⁰ Of course, there were issues of translation and some small discrepancies. When relevant, these will be mentioned in the following articles.

articulate the patterns that our statistical analysis reveals. For more results related to qualitative research see the article on experiences of theatre in this issue.

While our methods were designed to make our data and results as comparable as possible, they do have their limitations. For one, not all of the cities were able to collect all of the data: Maribor, Aarhus and Bern did not collect audience experience data, for instance, and Newcastle was not able to collect supply data. The time periods in which data was collected also differed between each city's project. Tartu's data come from the calendar year 2010, while Aarhus, Debrecen, Groningen and Maribor collected data on the 2010/11 season (from September 2010 to August 2011). Bern's supply data could only be collected for six months; to ensure its comparability with the data from other cities, we have extrapolated Bern's data mathematically to account for a full twelve months. These differences are important but inevitable, and will be clearly pointed out when relevant in each of the following articles.

In particular, we draw the reader's attention to the particularity of our research in the theatre system of Newcastle, England. This research looked not only at the city of Newcastle but the area of Tyneside, in which it sits. While Newcastle, with a population of 279,000, is on the larger end of comparable to the other cities, the Tyneside area, with a population of over 800,000, is considerably larger.¹¹ In addition, all of the other cities represented are not just non-capitals, they also represent the smaller nations of Europe, a category in which England, of course, does not fit.¹² The research in Tyneside was also done a few years later than that in the other cities (2014 instead of 2011). While these differences are worthy of note, we do think that the data from Tyneside provide a useful complement to the data gathered in the other cities in the project.

The STEP City Study expanded

After this introduction, the present issue begins with an article that introduces and compares the organisation of the theatre systems of the different cities and countries represented. Seventeen years ago, two members of STEP compiled a book detailing systematic information about the theatre systems of countries across Europe (Van Maanen and Wilmer, *Theatre Worlds in Motion*). But in this

¹¹Tyneside consists of the cities of Newcastle and Gateshead, which stand across from each other on opposite banks of the River Tyne, and the less urban regions of North and South Tyneside. The larger region known as Tyne and Wear adds the city of Sunderland (population 275,000), which lies to the south. None of the research for this project included Sunderland.

¹² Arts policy in the United Kingdom is a devolved responsibility; Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and England all have separate arts councils and funding practices. It is more useful for this project, therefore, to see Newcastle as an example of an English city than a British one, even though it is twice as far from London as it is from Edinburgh.

current publication, we attempt to be more specific and concrete. It has long been a hypothesis of STEP – and, indeed, of theatre sociologists in general – that the experiences audiences have with works of theatre can usefully be seen as the *outcomes* of the theatre systems that produce, distribute and offer that work to an audience. Different theatre systems, in this view, ought to lead to different ways of using theatre and thus different experiences. One could imagine, for instance, that a system structured on the basis of the free market produces a different sort of theatre supply, and leads to more comforting and less challenging outcomes than a system that uses subsidy to distance theatre companies from market forces.¹³

Following this, we will present our data set and an analysis of it. We will not do this city by city, but rather, in a trio of articles which mirror the divisions between the three kinds of data we gathered. First, we offer an article on what types of productions and performances are offered to the public in each city, and in what numbers, which we will refer to as the article on theatre supply. Next, we will present *who*, demographically, is making use of what part of this supply (article on theatre audiences). Finally we will consider *what* uses their audiences made of them; that is, the functions that these performances had for their audiences, described in quantitative and qualitative ways (article on experiences of theatre). The presentation and analysis of data in these three articles then form the basis for a conclusion comparing the different cities' systems (concluding article). We will draw connections between the organisation of theatre's production, distribution and reception in each city to our data on the supply, demographics and function of theatre in each of these cities. A brief portrait of each city is included in this issue as supplementary material.

Making sense of the relationships between theatre's organisation and theatre's social function is central to STEP's overall research agenda. While this special issue cannot fully explain those relationships, the articles within do offer a useful demonstration of what sort of data and analyses are necessary to do such work. This is a rich and helpful data set, and one that will reward future research. Future analysis could go into more detail, for instance, about the differences in experiences observed between infrequent and frequent theatre-goers, or between aesthetically complex and aesthetically simple performances. Further work could also break down audiences by age group, or performances by genre, to a greater degree than we have been able to do here. Nevertheless, we hope that the research presented in this special issue whets the appetite of and offers a starting point to others who wish to delve more deeply into these research questions, as we plan to do ourselves in the months and years to come.

13 While this may not be the case for the largest cities, where the number of people interested in the newest forms of art can be large enough to support such experimental work on a market basis, this would not be applicable to any of the smaller cities considered in this research.

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