

In this article, the author discusses how the so-called participatory turn in culture has challenged the distinction between professional and amateur art and how we understand the value of the two. Building on and discussing Bentley's classical definition of theatre, she argues that the role of the producer and the recipient is changing and that the consequence is a more blurred distinction between artistic and social values and between process and product. By using examples from the European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017 as cases, the author looks further into how culture for and culture with children have been combined and what the values and assumptions are behind such practices.

Keywords: Aarhus 2017, children's culture, European Capitals of Culture, professional theatre, amateur theatre, participation

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Children on Stage in Aarhus 2017: The Participatory Turn as a Challenge for the Distinction Between Professional and Amateur Art

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Denmark is internationally acknowledged for its high standard of professional theatre for children, so, when Aarhus was designated European Capital of Culture 2017, it could have been expected that theatre for children would form a part of the programme, showing all of Europe one of the strengths of the city and the country. However, very little professional theatre for children was a part of the programme. Instead, the section of the Aarhus 2017 programme targeted towards children was dominated by various projects in which children themselves were active as co-creators and performers.

In this article, I will discuss the reasons for and the implications of this focus on children as co-creators and performers in Aarhus 2017. I will do so by combining an analysis of the Aarhus 2017 programme with theories about theatre and the societal value of theatre as well as a more general theories about participation and participatory culture. My analytical focus will be on three case studies, all of which were large-scale Aarhus 2017 projects that included children as co-creators.

My aim is to discuss how the participatory turn can be seen as a challenge to the traditional distinction between professional and amateur theatre in the area of children's theatre. This blurring of boundaries also challenges how we understand the societal value of these performances.

In line with this, I will address the following key questions:

- Who is expected to benefit from these performances? The participants or the audience?
- How do we understand the relationship between process and product?
- How are the social and the artistic values balanced in a creative process that has an end product as its objective?

I begin the article by presenting a theoretical framework to understand the societal value of the arts. Here, I build on Hans van Maanen's theoretical definition as well as Edelmann and Šorli's (2015) empirical analysis of different values, which I then link to Bentley's classical definition of theatre. By doing so, I demonstrate the different value sets attached to professional and amateur theatre, respectively. I then continue by arguing that the boundaries between professional and amateur theatre are challenged by the participatory turn in culture and new, interactive and co-created forms of theatre. Based on this, I present my case of Aarhus 2017 and how the theme of "rethinking" led many cultural producers to experiment with new formats and types of events. I present the children's part of the programme and argue that it was dominated by events in which the children were active participants rather than passive spectators. I then analyse the effects of this by examining three specific cases.

The societal value of professional and amateur theatre

The academic and political debate around the value of art has been ongoing for years and has included a variety of academic contributions, such as Belfiore and Bennett's *The Social Impact of the Arts* and MacDowall et al.'s *Making Culture Count*. The aim of this article is not to settle this debate but to base my discussion of the value of theatre on some of its contributions. My main point of departure is Hans van Maanen's distinction between the artistic, aesthetic and social value of art and his argument that artistic value represents the core value of art. According to Van Maanen, both artistic and aesthetic value are at the centre of the experience of art, but, whereas the aesthetic experience confirms existing perception schemata (and is comfortable), the artistic experience challenges them. According to Van Maanen, aesthetic and artistic values are intrinsic to the experience of art, whereas other values, such as different types of social values, are extrinsic. These extrinsic values may include social cohesion, a sense of community, and learning.

I will argue that this understanding needs to be challenged when wishing to understand the difference between professional and amateur arts. Such a claim has been explored by Edelman and Šorli, who, in their analysis of commercial, professional subsidised and amateur theatre, argue that these types of theatre "are justified through quite different sets of value" (235). Their results indicate that social values and "loyalty and social cohesion" (232) were important aspects of amateur theatre seen from an audience perspective. From this perspective, the value of amateur theatre was also closely linked to "being impressed at the level of *work* the performers are putting in" (214). Building on these results, I further explore the understanding of the value of amateur theatre by examining it from both an audience perspective and a performer/participant perspective.

One way of understanding the different value of professional and amateur theatre is to employ Bentley's classical definition of theatre: "A impersonates B while C looks". Even though theatre has developed since this classical definition was formulated, it remains a useful starting point for the description of the societal value of theatre and the distinction between professional and amateur theatre. In professional theatre, the classical idea is that the societal value of theatre is closely linked to the experience of C, the spectator. In Hans van Maanen's words, the aim of professional theatre is to give C an artistic experience that challenges perception schemes and makes way for new understandings. The role of the performer is to do his or her best to give the spectators an artistic experience. It is thus neither the actor (A) nor – perhaps more self-evidently – the fictional character (B) who should benefit from the experience. From a cultural policy perspective, it is because of the value of the experience of C that professional theatre is subsidised.

This is different for amateur theatre in which the societal value is closely connected to the experience of A, who is expected to benefit from the experience of creating theatre. The spectator (C) might also benefit from the experience, but this is less important, especially when considering the artistic value. The assumed lower quality of the experience might mean that the spectator has an aesthetic but not an artistic experience, which is acceptable in amateur theatre. In amateur theatre, it is social values such as a sense of community or sharing experiences as a family that form important parts of the experience.

Due to several developments within the theatre field and the broader cultural field, Bentley's classical definition of theatre is no longer valid – at least not in its simple form. As described by Ines Therese Berg, more participatory forms of professional theatre practices have developed during the last ten to twenty years. These developments have challenged the definition of theatre and the boundaries between theatre performances and other social events.

The participatory turn

Berg contextualises the changes in theatre practices within a broader cultural change, one that has been described as the "participatory turn" (Jenkins). This general cultural turn towards participation has challenged the clear distinction between the societal value of professional and amateur theatre. The emergence of concepts such as the Prod-user (a person being both a producer and a user) and the Pro-Am (a person being both a professional and an amateur) points towards a blurring of boundaries (Leadbeater and Miller). Leadbeater and Miller describe a change from the 20th to the 21st century: "Amateurism came to be a term of derision. Professionalism was a mark

of seriousness and high quality. [...] But in the last two decades a new breed of amateurs has emerged: The Pro-Ams, amateurs who work to professional standards" (12).

Technological changes, in particular, have driven this transformation, since they provide easier access to production and distribution. These changes have had an extensive impact on music, for example, but what about theatre? How has theatre, which is traditionally understood as a live event, been influenced by these large-scale cultural transformations? How have they influenced – or not influenced – the way in which theatre is produced, distributed and received? As Berg describes, one of the ways these changes have influenced theatre is in a turn towards more participatory forms of theatre, closely linked to the so-called "relational aesthetics" (Bourriaud) in which the social value of art becomes a key element of the experience. This turn towards a more participatory theatrical experience can be viewed as a way to meet new audience expectations of being actively involved in instead of passively perceiving a theatre production.¹

With the participatory turn, we see two tendencies that challenge my above description of the value of professional and amateur theatre respectively: 1) The Pro-Ams produce (or at least wish to produce) theatre of a high standard that has artistic value for the spectator (C); and 2) some interactive forms of professional theatre emphasise the social value of the theatrical event in forms of theatre in which the distinction between A and C arguably becomes blurred.

Another challenge to the traditional distinction between professional and amateur theatre is the spreading of co-creational approaches to the creation of culture, including theatre. In such co-creational approaches, the citizens might be positioned as "A" (performers on equal terms with professionals); "B" (the material for the characters and stories presented on stage); and "C" (the spectators viewing the stories of themselves, their community, or other groups in society).

European Capital of Culture Aarhus 2017

How were these cultural transformations tackled in Aarhus 2017? It has been argued that European Capitals of Culture, in general, have made a participatory shift and now focus more on the engagement of the citizens in the given city or region (Tommachi et al.). They have done so in an attempt to secure the engagement of a broader range of citizens. This was also the case in Aarhus 2017, especially during the bidding phase (2007–2012) in which Aarhus and the Central Denmark Region developed the

¹ It is a long and complex discussion whether "active" participation is "better" than "passive" reception, and as Rancière has argued, that might not always be the case. However, it is not my agenda with this article to value one form of theatrical experience over another, but simply to analyse and understand the shift in forms of theatrical events noticed as a part of Aarhus 2017.

project. As a part of the bidding phase, the overall theme “rethink” was introduced: “Rethink is the outcome of a process which involved thousands of citizens, who all took part in uncovering what sets Aarhus and the region apart in Europe [...] Our citizens have requested a project which reflects society and their lives and which addresses tomorrow’s challenges” (*Aarhus 2017 Candidate* 12). Before I further explore the development of the Aarhus 2017 programme by focusing on the three cases of participatory performances for and with children, I will introduce Aarhus 2017 in more general terms.

Aarhus was one of the two annual European Capitals of Culture appointed in 2012 by the European Commission. Aarhus is the second-largest city in Denmark with approximately 250,000 inhabitants and a developed cultural infrastructure. The European Capital of Culture project included not only the city of Aarhus but also the entire Central Denmark Region, which stretches from coast to coast across the mainland of Denmark, Jutland. In total, this region has approximately one million inhabitants and consists of 19 municipalities, all of which were engaged in Aarhus 2017. The theme of Aarhus 2017, “rethink”, was actively used to create interdisciplinary and cross-institutional collaborations as part of the programme. In this way, many traditional boundaries were challenged by the project. The programme included a wide variety of cultural activities including sport and food, but traditional art forms such as theatre, visual arts and music dominated. A total of 628 events attracted an audience of 3.3 million to the year-long programme, whose highlights included four so-called mega-events and twelve so-called full moon events. Twelve per cent of the programme and one of the twelve full moon events were targeted towards children. The regional Children’s Opening preceded the official opening by one day. In the words of the Aarhus 2017 CEO, Rebecca Matthews:

Children and young people have a very special place in the programme of Aarhus 2017. We are the first European Capital of Culture to open with an event created by, for and with children. We dedicate the year as European Capital of Culture to the playful, innovative and to people who have the courage and desire to rethink. Children have a creativity and spontaneity that challenges all of us to discover new ways to work, be and think, so the year as European Capital of Culture is to a high degree also the year of the children (Aarhus 2017, 17 Jan 2017, my translation).

Danish children’s culture

In this quotation, Rebecca Matthews refers to a common distinction in the way children’s culture is perceived in the Nordic countries: the distinction between “for”, “with” and “by” children (Mouritsen, Juncker).

Culture *for* children is arts and culture presented for and introduced to children by adults who have created the event or work of art that the children are experiencing. Here the children are receivers of something created for them by someone else. The professional artists produce a product that aims to give children an artistic experience as an audience. This can be directly linked to the understanding of the societal value of professional theatre described above. Here, the children are C (those who look). Culture *with* children is still organised or facilitated by adults, but here children actively participate in the creation of cultural expressions. In culture with children, the children and adults engage together in a creative process that aims to give the participating children an experience of expressing themselves through creative means. This can be linked to the understanding of the societal value of amateur theatre described above. Here, the children are the A who impersonates B. Culture *by* children is children engaging in playful activities themselves. This is a product of the children's own initiative (it is not guided by an adult) and is often spontaneous. So, even though Rebecca Matthews includes this in the quotation above, I would argue that this form of cultural activity is not well-suited for a large-scale cultural programme planned years in advance. This means that there are essentially two options for including children's culture in the Aarhus 2017 programme: culture *for* and culture *with* children.

The basis for producing a programme for children as part of Aarhus 2017 was strong, especially regarding professional theatre. Danish Children's theatre is internationally recognised for its high artistic quality and some of the well-established companies such as Gruppe 38, Teater Refleksion and Carte Blanche are located in the Central Denmark Region. Denmark also has a relatively well-established cultural infrastructure for children's culture, since each municipality in Denmark has a library that includes a department for children and that, in addition to access to books, offers a variety of cultural activities. All municipalities are also obliged to have a music school for (or to offer music teaching to) children. It was therefore understandable that children's culture formed one of the focus areas of Aarhus 2017, since this is one of the areas in which Aarhus could be expected to stand out artistically, thus living up to the objective of the European Capital of Culture scheme: "Highlight the richness and diversity of cultures in Europe". (https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en).

However, as the three cases below demonstrate, in Aarhus 2017, the "pure" professional art for children faded into the background in favour of combinations of amateur and professional performances and events that combined the values of the two in new and different ways. The three cases I have chosen are not necessarily representative of the Aarhus 2017 children's programme. The programme included professional performances for children such as *Hjerterumstrilogien*, presented by Syddjurs Egnsteater, and more traditional approaches to culture with children

in which the creative process was in focus and only limited attention was given to the quality of the audience experience. It even included a mobile and experimental playground/installation in urban spaces, *My Playground* that made room for culture by children. I selected the three cases both because they were large scale, ambitious and prestigious parts of the programme and because they represent a new and emerging form of children's culture, one that could be seen as closely linked to the local ambition of Aarhus 2017 to rethink as well as to the global trend of a participatory culture. The three cases are: *Message in a Bottle to the Future*, *Land of Wishes* and *Culture on Tour*. All of these cases contain elements of theatre but are not solely theatre projects. During Aarhus 2017, research assistant Tanja Pfaff Louring and I researched these cases as part of the evaluation of Aarhus 2017 conducted by rethinkIMPACTS 2017 at Aarhus University (Louring and Hansen; Degn et al.). The methods used to gather data varied from case to case but included interviews with the professional artists and producers, participatory observation, and informal and formal interviews with the participating children.

Message in a Bottle to the Future

Message in a Bottle to the Future was the culmination of a long development project carried out by Aarhus Musikskole (Aarhus Music School) and was the key part of the children's opening show in Aarhus. The performance was presented on the main stage of the concert hall in the centre of the city. From 2010, Aarhus Musikskole had been working to develop a way in which children could engage in collective, creative processes in order to present high-quality performances, an ambition very similar to that of the Pro-Ams (Hansen). This was achieved by creating a framework for the productions, which consisted of a narrative with ten phases (each symbolising a feeling), two main characters and a simple storyline. In addition, the creative products produced by other children engaging with *Message in a Bottle to the Future* functioned as input for new versions. In this way, creative material (such as songs, costumes, poems and pictures) was passed on from child to child regardless of age and artistic skills. This way of engaging children in creative processes differs considerably from the traditional way of teaching in music schools in Denmark, in which solo teaching based on the principle of apprenticeship is still dominant. *Message in a Bottle to the Future* can thus be seen as a strategic project dealing with the challenge to music schools that the Pro-Am revolution constitutes: It is no longer a given that the professional adults are the best creators of music and creative expressions. In addition to this, *Message in a Bottle to the Future* challenges the idea that the performance is a part of the pupils' learning process and thus entirely done for the sake of the participants (and perhaps their proud parents). The ambition of *Message in a Bottle to the Future* was to give

audiences, including members of the paying public that were not necessarily affiliated with the performing children, an artistic experience. On stage were children of different ages and skill levels as well as a professional actor, Bodil Alling, who functioned as a narrator. She had never performed with children previously, but she acknowledged the value of the format of *Message in a Bottle for the Future*. As a part of this format, professional technicians, light designers and other crew members contributed to a presentation that, on a technical level, could match any professional performance.

The regional children's opening of Aarhus 2017

As a sign that Aarhus 2017 prioritised children's participation in the European Capital of Culture, the children's opening took place on 20 January, the day before the official opening ceremony. Unlike the official opening, which only took place in the city centre of Aarhus, the children's opening took place in all 19 municipalities across the region. In each municipality, one or more cultural institutions (for example, the library or the professional theatre) assumed responsibility for the local version of the opening within a shared artistic framework. The children's opening was called *The Land of Wishes*, and a song and a dance were produced and distributed as material that could be used for the opening. The song was produced by professional musicians but based on input from children who had participated in a workshop prior to Aarhus 2017. As such, the idea about co-creation recurred in the way *Land of Wishes* was produced. Despite being very different from each other, none of the opening events were solely *for children*. They all included an element of *with children*. In Favrskov Municipality, the opening event took place on a sports field in a small village. Here children from kindergartens and primary schools gathered to present paintings and drawings of their own wishes, which were exhibited on wooden beacons. The drawings depicted a range of personal wishes – everything from a new toy to a sibling to play with – and the children were thus given an opportunity to express themselves creatively. The beacons with the drawings were burnt down at the end of the day, symbolising the distribution of the children's wishes across the entire region. This performative element evoked different approaches from the teachers helping the children: some instructed the children to endeavour to make excellent drawings because of the importance of the event, and some instructed the children to limit their efforts, since their drawings were going to be burnt anyway. In Silkeborg, the children also contributed to the creation of colourful outdoor spatial sculptures designed by architect Ragnhild Melbye. The sculptures were beautiful and thus attracted visitors during the period they were exhibited. The role of the children in the production of the sculptures was more symbolic than creative: the sculptures consisted of thousands of Plexiglas elements on which every child in the municipality had added his/her fingerprint in grey paint. However unique, it was impossible for

a given child to identify his/her own fingerprint on the finished work, so, here, the children's contribution was more about taking part in the process than influencing the final product.

In this way, Silkeborg was somewhat of an exception to the general tendency that the children's opening involved creative practices familiar to the children, such as singing and drawing, rather than the professional production of arts. In general, active participation and the social experiences of taking part in a process were prioritised over the artistic experience of a high-quality product presented to the children.

Culture on Tour

Culture on Tour was part of a large project carried out by seven cultural institutions in the city of Randers. It was led by the professional theatre in Randers, EgnsTeater. Each of the seven institutions engaged children and artists in a co-creation process, such as making music videos, composing new music and staging performances. The ambition was that the results should be presented to the public alongside professional art for children at the Spektakel Festival. In this way, the intention of the project was to award equal status to professional art for children and art created with children. In the process of working together with professional artists, the children experienced what it was like to be taken seriously as creators of art. They had to work hard and practise, and they were encouraged to develop their skills. Many of the artists were good at spotting the children's competencies and building the work on these skills. This was the case with the composer Mogens Christensen, who made compositions in collaboration with the children based on their own improvised rhythms. In this process, the children demonstrated such a high level of rhythmic competencies that it even surprised the composer. However, whereas the children were taken seriously as co-artists during the process, the presentation did not attempt to award equal status to art with and art for children. Mainly due to practicalities, the productions by the children were presented to other children from schools and kindergartens on week days, whereas the professional programme was presented to the public at the weekend. In this way, the project did not succeed in its ambition to present professional and amateur art on equal terms.

Art for and with children in Aarhus 2017

The three cases presented above show that there are different approaches to combining art for and art with children and that such approaches can push the value of the event more towards the "amateur" or the "professional" side. It is difficult to balance and

award equal value to the process of the participants and the product experienced by audiences (in some cases, the same children function as both the participants and the audience). There is no doubt that these projects are important experiments in the effort to find new approaches to the production and consumption of culture *for*, *with* and *by* children – and, based on the participatory turn, such experiments challenge preexisting (and dominant 20th-century) understandings of the value of professional and amateur art.

The Aarhus 2017 programme for children was based on the assumption that the way in which the traditional high-quality culture for children should be “rethought” as a part of the European Capital of Culture was to move towards a more co-creational and participatory approach to culture in which children should be active co-producers and participants. This departs from the previously clear distinction between culture *with* and culture *for* children.

The co-creation and participatory approach to the children’s programme in Aarhus 2017 can be linked to three different elements occurring on three different levels:

- 1) The local level: here, the theme of rethink encouraged producers to experiment.
- 2) The level of European Capitals of Culture: here, citizen engagement and co-creation is seen as a norm to counteract the disengagement of citizens in large-scale cultural events (see Tommarchi et al.).
- 3) A general cultural level: here, the participatory turn has challenged the professional production of art, questioned the value of “passive” consumption, and challenged the classical distinction between professionals and amateurs.

It is worthwhile reflecting on why these elements did not manifest themselves in a more diverse range of events “for” and “with” children (in various forms) but rather in children performing for other children and children watching other children perform. In this way, children became both the A and the C in Bentley’s classical understanding of theatre (to some extent, they were even B, the subject matter of the performances – this was the case in *The Land of Wishes* but not in *Message in a Bottle to the Future*). It is also worthwhile reflecting on why this occurred to a far greater extent in the parts of the programme targeted towards children than in those parts targeted towards adults. What was the underlying norm and view of children that caused this to happen? The programme director, Juliana Engberg, clearly views children as more creative and keener to be active than adults. However, in my opinion, this seems like a reductionist and romanticised understanding of children that has the potential to endanger the broad approach to children’s culture that has been developed in Denmark over the last 50 years – an approach in which culture for, with and by children in various combinations are equally important.

Given the changes in children's culture these years, there is a need for academics and practitioners to reflect upon and experiment with, the connections and differences between art for and art with children. This should be done in a way that makes a variety of forms and values possible. It is necessary to ask further questions, such as: Is it fair to expect that amateur performances produced by children should give the spectators artistic experiences? Which artistic concepts and frameworks can make this happen? Are the social values of the participating children influenced either positively or negatively by the expectation that their product should provide an audience with an artistic experience? These dilemmas were tackled differently in the different projects in Aarhus 2017, but they were never explicitly addressed. Further empirical audience and participant studies need to be conducted to explore the relationship between values for participants and values for audiences.

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