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Theatre Talks – Audience Development in Three Perspectives: Marketing, Cultural Policy and Theatrical Communication

Abstract

Theatre Talks emerged as an audience reception research method in Sweden. In this article I describe the evolution of the method and put it into practical perspectives. At first, Theatre Talks provided extensive insights into the experiences of Stockholm theatre audiences in the 1980s. Those results inspired the inventor of the method, Willmar Sauter, to develop a theatre communications model, which changed the academic discourse on the theatrical communication process. In Australia, Rebecca Scollen successfully applied the method for an audience development projects aimed at non-attenders. In Denmark, Louise Ejgod Hansen noticed that Theatre Talks might access a democratic potential of theatre. All of these effective applications of the method inspired me to look at Theatre Talks as an audience development tool from three combinatory perspectives: (1) marketing – its potential for increased ticket sales and changing the behaviour of the customers, (2) cultural policy – for higher diversity and participation in theatre, and (3) theatrical communication – for improved understanding and better satisfaction from participation in the performance.

Keywords: Theatre Talks, audience development, audience research, cultural marketing, culture policy

Słowa kluczowe: rozmowy teatralne, rozwój publiczności, badania publiczności, marketing kultury, polityka kulturalna

“Who experiences what in a theatrical performance, and why?” was the question that inspired theatre scholar Willmar Sauter [Sauter et al. 1986: 27] to develop a new method of reception research – Theatre Talks. Originally, this question was asked in 1925 by Mikhail Zagorsky [Kleberg 1993: 97] as a response to the published

results of one of the first empirical studies of theatre audiences in Moscow. Meyerhold's assistant, Vasily Fyodorov, had carried out this research, based on recorded audience reactions to five productions from the season 1924/1925. The research did not reach any in-depth conclusions [Kleberg 1993: 96]. Zagorsky, who himself was using questionnaires to describe spectators coming to Meyerhold's theatre, opposed this behaviouristic survey¹ and urged for audience research (with socio-logically-informed descriptions of the composition of the audience) and reception research (which would describe spectators' experiences during the theatrical event) [cf. Sauter 2002]. His question remained unanswered, but motivated coming generations of theatre scholars to search for ways of studying spectator experiences. In this article, I will focus on describing the reception research method, Theatre Talks, which became a tool that can be used for multiple purposes. I will show how it stimulated development of a theatre communications model [Sauter 2000], trace its evolution into an audience development method for non-theatre-goers [Scollen 2008] and as a tool for increasing the democratic potential of theatre [Hansen 2013]. Further, I argue that Theatre Talks may serve to bring together three perspectives of audience development: (1) marketing (in increasing and diversifying groups of spectators), (2) cultural policy (in including excluded groups), and (3) theatrical communication (in supporting better understanding of theatrical codes and conventions), and in doing so they could become an instrument of development for both theatre institutions and audiences.

The Theatre Talks Method

Johan was invited by his friend to come and see the performance with a small group of their friends. He learned that this visit was a part of a research project. He was told that he should reserve the entire evening, because after the performance the whole group of friends would meet to talk about the performance. He was a bit nervous about being studied, but happy that he was going to be with his friends. That gave him more confidence.

At the night of the performance he and six of his friends met in the theatre with a group leader (a scholar) to watch a Shakespeare play. Johan was not sure whether he liked the performance. But he was curious what the others were thinking. When the performance had come to its end, the group leader invited everybody to a private apartment nearby the theatre. Light refreshments were waiting for them there. Everybody sat around a large table and the

¹ For Zogorsky recording reactions of the audience as a whole could not bring important results, because there was a diversified audience present at all a performance. For him it was the social preconditioning that could explain why different spectators would react differently to what they see. This is the reason why he subscribed to the questionnaire as an audience research method [Kleberg 1993: 95–97].

group leader explained the rules of the conversation: the participants were supposed to discuss anything that they found worth talking about. There were no pre-prepared questions. It was their experiences that were interesting, not a proper or correct analysis of the play. They could talk about anything they liked or disliked. And they did.

For Johan it turned out that it was very interesting and pleasurable to chat about his experience with others. His friends brought up topics that he would not have thought about. Through this conversation his assessment of the evening changed – or actually improved. He even thought it would have been a good idea to meet more often and maybe even start a “theatre club” with his friends after the end of the research project.

This is a fictional illustration of what a Theatre Talk evening could have looked like when Willmar Sauter, Curt Isaksson, and Lisbeth Jansson [Sauter et al. 1986] started implementing the method in Stockholm in 1983. They were looking for insights into the theatre experiences of different audiences, what were the foci of their experiences and why.

There were 25 groups of spectators (a total of 180 people) who participated in the study. They were coming from numerous social spheres and represented varied occupations (private companies, schools, hospitals, state, and community services). Even though they were not entirely representative of the population of Stockholm, the researchers maintained that the combination of participants was comparable to the theatre-going part of the city public (including habitual theatre-goers and people who had not been to theatre for many years) [Sauter et al. 1986: 69]. The researchers’ point of departure was a questionnaire, which registered the socio-cultural background of the spectators participating in the Theatre Talks. It was assumed that there are seven factors that might influence how spectators are experiencing a theatrical performance: gender, age, education, social status (based on their income, level of education, and belonging to social class), cultural activity (social and cultural activity that could be documented), theatre preferences (‘serious’ vs. ‘light’ theatre), and theatre habits (average number of theatre visits *pro anno*) [Sauter et al. 1986: 36–40]. The compiled results of studying the groups allowed for an extensive socio-demographic profile of Stockholm theatre audiences.

Even though the authors did not disregard the need for more comprehensive and traditional survey-based research (as the socio-cultural background of the audience might be important in analysing their reception of the performance), they wanted to go beyond the socio-demographic factors that impacted the results of surveys and/or interviews: the artificiality of the interview situation taking place during the intermission or after the performance, and the fact that the respondents would only talk about the topics included the questionnaire. In Sauter’s assessment, surveys would not give access to the most important aspects of the theatrical experience: spectators’ emotions and their original thoughts [Sauter 2000: 175]. His idea was to design a method that could make the “interview situation” feel like the

“natural one” of conversation. He was thinking in terms of what the theatregoer would or could do after watching a performance: engage in conversation about the performance with fellow visitors. The result was Theatre Talks.

The simplest possible way to describe the method is this: a group of approximately seven people goes to the theatre together and afterwards sits down to have a conversation about their individual experiences with the performance. The number of participants makes it possible to create a group, where the chances for it being dominated by one person are reduced and at the same time the group is too small to be split into fractions [Sauter 2000: 176]. Sauter chose to study groups where participants knew each other in order to make conversations easier and so that participants felt more comfortable. A group leader (a scholar or a student) accompanied each group, with the sole task of supporting the group’s dynamics and clarifying ambiguous parts of the conversation. The leaders did not ask any questions – it was up to the participants to decide which topics were undertaken. The combination of those guidelines proved to be fruitful: researchers got insights into participants’ experiences that otherwise could have been missed. Additionally, the participants enjoyed partaking in the study².

However, this does not mean that there are no possible flaws in the method. Firstly, there can be an imbalance in the group’s dynamics, which might lead to too much involvement of the group leader (in the attempt to get the talk going). Secondly, Theatre Talks happen shortly after the performance ends, which might not give enough time for the participants to collect their thoughts about the experience. Thirdly, talking about feelings might not be easy for every participant. And lastly, as in every study where people share their opinions, the utterances are believed to correspond with actual judgments and opinions (at the same time there is always the risk that people do not mean what they say) [Sauter 2000: 177].

The description of the method brings to mind a well-known marketing research tool: the focus groups. One could consider Theatre Talks a specific version of this tool designed to focus on spectators’ experiences and carried out without the pre-prepared scenario. As such they hold similar disadvantages for the institutions as other focus group studies do: they do not bring data that can be statistically handled, their findings cannot be generalised to the whole population, and their results may heavily depend on the skills of the moderator [Cf. Kolb 2008: 129–130]. However, as further research show [Scollen 2008; Hansen 2015]: they hold a very promising potential for audience development (including groups that consist of non-theatregoers). In the meantime, this was not Sauter’s intended use of the method.

² Later research has confirmed these results [Scollen 2008; Hansen 2013].

Towards a theatre communication model

The first application of Theatre Talks brought many interesting insights about performance reception (e.g. that gender of the spectator does not influence her attitude towards the theatre or that her age changes the experience, with the most noticeable difference between adolescents and older spectators [Sauter 2000]). One of the perhaps most intriguing insights provided the answer to the question why spectators do (or do not) appreciate a performance: appreciation relies heavily on the quality of the acting [Sauter et al. 1986: 401]. It was the appreciation of the actors that made spectators more interested in the fiction of the performance and it dominated the impressions of the entire event, regardless of the social and cultural background of the respondents or the type of performance.

This finding became a cornerstone in Sauter's conception of theatrical communication, which would combine "the creation of meaning, the enjoyment of artistry and skills, and the personal evaluation of the performer" [Sauter 2000: 4]. While designing the first Theatre Talks study, Sauter made an analytical distinction between artistic aspects of the performances and the fiction they produced. Since it proved to be fruitful, he kept cultivating his ideas [cf. Martin, Sauter 1995] and developed a 3-level theatre communications model that kept the spectator-performer relationship and its contexts in focus:

The *sensory* level describes the interaction between performer(s) and spectator(s) as a personal relationship. The spectator perceives the physical and mental presence of the actor and reacts to it more or less spontaneously, just as the actor senses the presence of an audience, its size as well as its mood. The *artistic* level makes the theatrical event different from everyday life. What happens on stage is not real life; it is a presentation with some kind of artistic merits which can be appreciated by the audience or not. The *symbolic* mode of communication, finally, is a consequence of the artistic otherness of the event: meaning can be attributed to the artistic actions [Sauter 2000: 7].

In this model Sauter brings the spectator's experience to the forefront: it is not only meaning that appears and is assigned importance during theatrical communication, but also emotions and cognitive processes. This allowed for the shift in the academic discourse on communication in the theatre: from prioritizing the semiotics of the performance to including the spectator's emotions and cognition as well as external contexts in which the communication takes place, and whereby it is influenced.

Another important aspect of Theatre Talks was its social dimension: the talks were very pleasurable for the participants, who were verbalizing and sharing experiences among themselves and facilitating each other's interpretations. Conducting reception research Sauter deliberately did not aim for strengthening participants' theatre competences, although he was aware that this learning process was most

likely to take place. Following Sauter, other scholars have been keen on developing those competences.

Theatre Talks as Audience Development Tool

Rebecca Scollen adjusted the method to become a useful tool for both audience reception research and audience development (understood as increasing quantity and quality of the visitors). She applied it in Northern Territory and Queensland in Australia in 2004–2006. She called it “Talking Theatre” with the goal to:

develop a profile of non-attenders in regional areas; to understand their reasons for non-attendance; to identify their cultural and creative needs and to discover their reception of three live performances (...) and of PACs [Performing Arts Centres – D.S.N.] who presented them [Scollen 2008: 45–46].

Scollen focused on non-theatre-goers, whom she described as those who do not purchase tickets to live performance (if they did in the past, it was a “one-off” occasion). Her research design extended the intervals between performances that participants saw to a month (compared to Sauter’s week) because she aimed at discovering if repeated visits to theatre and discussions after the performances would have an educational impact on the participants. In order to support PACs in building new audiences and developing their involvement with local communities, Scollen added more questionnaires to the method: there was an initial survey, which gathered demographic and psychographic data about the participants; a set of short questionnaires that participants filled in directly after each performance (before participating in theatre talks), in which they were asked to rate their experience and understanding of the play; and a post-research survey for assessing the whole research process and the likelihood of their future attendance at institutions they had visited. This last questionnaire was delivered to the participants a few weeks after the research ended [Scollen 2008: 49]. This addition of surveys allowed Scollen to build the more detailed profile of non-attenders. She observed and confirmed the Stockholm finding that “gender, age, and income did not appear to have direct impact on theatre attendance or reception of theatrical performance; (...) [it is – D.S.N.] exposure to performance and an art education [that – D.S.N.] increases [sic] interest and confidence in theatre-going” [Scollen 2007: 54]. Even though many of the participants belonged to the group, which was associated with the “model spectator” (middle-aged, tertiary educated, medium-to-high income earners), they did not think of themselves as theatre-goers [Scollen 2008: 50]. It was the Theatre Talks method that assisted in discovering their beliefs about theatre visits: the assumption that they would not be able to

enjoy, understand or relate to the performances; but also that they were not the type of the person who goes to the theatre. Participants were pleasantly surprised to notice that they were similar to the paying audience (in attire, age, and conduct): during their visits they observed that they could relate both to the performances and to the patrons [Scollen 2006: 23].

Another variation on Sauter's method was the fact that in Scollen's research the participants did not know each other. What could have been an obstacle in gathering valuable insights (not everybody likes to discuss with unknown people) had proven to be beneficial and productive: "The fact that they were placed in groups with strangers (...) appeared to increase their confidence in theatregoing dramatically" [Scollen 2007: 53]. The participants gained confidence when the strangers by the table were agreeing with their observations and interpretations. It also worked as a self- and peer-education tool: participants learned about theatre through their own experience (without a need to acquire knowledge from the professionals). Additionally, their interest in live performances increased [Scollen 2008: 53].

The success of the project can be summarized in the observation that many participants stated that they had enjoyed partaking in discussions with their peers as much or even more than in performances themselves [Scollen 2009: 8]. The project also generated financial results:

a 110% increase in ticket purchases by all participants. 29% of participants returned, on average more than once, which is 177% up on their previous attendance. Factoring in the guests they brought with them, results in a ticket multiplier of 397% per participant [Scollen 2008: 51].

Democratic Potential of Theatre Talks

Back in the Northern hemisphere, this time in Denmark, Theatre Talks has also proven successful as an audience development tool. Louise Ejgod Hansen discovered a new aspect of the method: Theatre Talks may increase the democratic potential of theatre.

The Danish research focused on diverse participant groups (who corresponded with the interests of theatres involved in the project) comprising both non-attenders and regular theatregoers. In the period of November 2010 to April 2013 34 Theatre Talks were carried out at 18 theatres in the Midtjylland region in Denmark, with the groups consisting of approximately eight persons each. The goal was to "create qualitative insight into diversity of theatrical experiences" [Hansen 2015: 346]. Participants saw three different performances together. In order to decrease the barrier connected with any uneasiness with the research situation participants were told they could bring a companion to the performance.

In her research Hansen noticed that Theatre Talks might shed light on the democratic potential of theatre. In order to explain how this can be done, she brings three perspectives together: theatre as an art form, cultural policy agenda, and the concept of “deliberative democracy” [Hansen 2013]. Referring to David Wiles, Hannah Arendt, Richard Sennett, and Jürgen Habermas, Hansen stresses two understandings of the democratic potential of theatre: (1) the community-building potential, which allows for the meeting between citizens and the creation of a space, which they can share as community; and (2) that theatre as a public space offers a possibility for citizens to reflect upon and debate diverse public issues, which are inspired by the theatrical experience [Hansen 2013: 11–12]. My own research experience and the previously mentioned projects confirm that Theatre Talks creates a space where discussion about public issues may occur. When participants are inspired by the performance, they do discuss not only the event itself, but also the issues it raised in its socio-political context. Moreover, sharing different points of view allows them to reflect on those issues afterwards. However, this observation seem to be limited to those who are taking part in the Theatre Talks project and not necessarily applicable to the entire auditorium, or even the participants after the project ends. The aspect of the potential for community building remains open to question. My hypothesis would be that this potential exists (because, as the Stockholm project showed, some research groups decided to continue to meet and discuss theatre after the project ended [Sauter 1986]), but the claim should be empirically examined.

The combination of cultural policy and the ideal of democratisation is strongly rooted in the welfare-based Nordic models and their focus on participation. Hansen justly connects Theatre Talks with removing barriers for participation, which may lead to a broader socioeconomic composition of the audiences, but she also points out that the assumption that “sitting in a theatre per se makes us more democratic human beings” [Hansen 2013: 13] needs to be qualified. While both Scollen and Hansen show that Theatre Talks do help removing barriers for theatregoing (economically with free ticketing, culturally by showing the participants that they are no different from the paying audience, and that they can understand and relate to the plays), it is important to mention that non-attenders in both projects probably had a positive attitude [cf. Hansen 2015] towards theatre: they were recruited for the research projects via advertising (i.e. it was the participants responding to the call, making an effort to join). Therefore, it is possible to assume that they were already to some extent interested in the theatre, or, at least, did not think that participating in the project would be a waste of time. The question if Theatre Talks could assist in removing barriers amongst excluded groups who do not have interest in theatre (and who are objectives of cultural policy’s aim for democratisation) remains unanswered.

Deliberative democracy is a concept defined by James S. Fishkin [2009]. He refers to practicing democracy on the micro-level: citizens being able to participate in the public debate and make informed decisions. Hansen asks how people should participate in theatre for the purpose of democratizing society and seeks answers in Fishkin's "trilemma of democratic reforms": deliberation (that leads to engagement in public debate), political equality (where every preference is included into the debate and evenly valued), and mass participation (which includes as many as possible in the political processes) [Hansen 2013: 13]. Those three principles are mutually conflicting (realizing any two will reduce the possibility for the third), but should be balanced for the deliberative democracy fulfilment [Fishkin 2009: 46]. Both Fishkin and Hansen agree that nowadays there is too much focus on mass participation instead of deliberation, which could lead to more engaged citizens (and spectators in case of theatre). Theatre Talks as such fill that need by offering the space for deliberation in an inviting environment, and as another observation shows: after participating in Theatre Talks some people actually changed their mind about the play they had seen³ [Hansen 2013: 15]. The method can challenge participants' beliefs concerning theatre and other spectators.

Three Audience Development Perspectives

Audience development projects often focus on addressing existing and potential groups of visitors (which include those that are very difficult to reach) in new ways with the aim at broadening the audience of the institution: either in quantitative ways (focused on increasing number of visitors and improving ticket sales) or qualitative ways (concentrated on improving visitors' theatrical competences and influencing their tastes) [Kawashima 2000: 9]. Anja Mølle Lindelof rightly notes that current discourse on audience development carries the risk of focusing only on marketing and social diversity and she calls this a "blind spot". Lindelof stresses the fact that the performance is "a context-based and complex social and aesthetic process" [Lindelof 2014: 208], and in this sense audience development projects should take it into consideration. As I see it, theatres are engaging in audience development for a variety of reasons: to promote their performances and build an audience which better suits the profile of the theatre; to fulfil government cultural policy goals; and to improve the relationships or communication processes between the audiences

³ Hansen says "several participants during and after the talks asked if they could change the evaluation questionnaire that they had been asked to fill in immediately after the performance" [Hansen 2013: 15]. This shows that participation in Theatre Talks changed their perception and understanding of the theatrical event.

and the artists or performances. This assumption leads me to three approaches to audience development, which do not have to be mutually exclusive.

The marketing approach focuses on spectators as customers and on audience development projects as products, but often neglects the actual aesthetic experience of art consumption [Larsen 2014: 189]. Lidia Varbanova, while describing marketing in the cultural sector, stresses that it can help “to attract and involve audiences, improve the efficiency of the distribution channels or improve the overall organisational image. Marketing in the arts is often well connected with fundraising and financial strategies, and it helps increasing the revenues from diverse sources, attracting supporters and fund-givers, or implementing a new price policy” [Varbanova 2012: 155]. She emphasises the profit and customer satisfaction that marketing should be bringing to the organisation. With that in mind, audience development programmes can be seen as successful when they generate revenue for the institution, influence customer behaviour, and answer to cultural customers’ needs. In other words, they should generate new (preferably paying) and engaged audiences.

The cultural policy approach brings in negotiations between two fields: culture/arts (with the emphasis on autonomy of the artist) and politics (with its obligations towards citizens). Those negotiations are often rooted in the discussions about the basic questions: what is culture; what kind of arts should be supported by the public funds; is culture exceptional, different from other policies and therefore deserves special treatment; is it only fine arts that brings objective good to people; or on the contrary – is culture ordinary, just another part of everyday life and therefore needs no special treatment [Vestheim 2012]. How governments (and other authoritative bodies) answer those questions shapes cultural policies on the local, national and international levels.

In audience development discourse it is the Nordic cultural model that often prevails with its strong stress on “cultural democracy”, which includes art dissemination and decentralisation with efforts to include citizens’ engagement in those processes [Duelund ed. 2002]. The visitor is seen as a citizen with her rights and needs, and an audience development project is a tool that implements the cultural policy into the everyday life. In practice, it brings attention to democratisation of the arts, social inclusion, and participation. Therefore, audience development programmes should help cultural institutions in reaching out towards non-attenders and serving not only as a place for dissemination of the arts, but also as a place, where local community can gather and learn about culture.

The last approach to audience development programmes focuses on the individual level, where the spectator and the artist meet⁴. As Sauter points out, there are two

⁴ In theatre this meeting between the spectator and the artist is quite personal, but in other arts institutions often it is mediated via the piece of art with which the visitor engages.

aspects of specific importance when considering any theatrical event: the nature of communication and the context [Sauter 2000: 2]. The first one concerns the question of what happens between the performer and the spectator during the performance, in the “here and now” (I already briefly described the levels of communication in the theatrical event earlier in this article). This communicative process is influenced by the contexts in which it takes place. These external factors of contexts include all circumstances of the communication (such as participants’ social, political, economical, educational backgrounds). Audience development projects belong to the contexts of both performance and spectators as they provide possibilities for the spectators to learn about theatre or, at least, try it out. My assumption is that the better communication, the larger contentment from participation. With this approach in mind, the audience development activities should aim at supporting and cultivating the process of communication on all or any of the levels (sensory, artistic and/or symbolic).

Conclusion

In this article I have shown how Theatre Talks evolved from an audience reception research method to becoming an inspiration for theatre scholars in their work on theories about spectators’ experiences, and finally ending up as a successful audience development tool. Theatre Talks can be analysed from all three perspectives of audience development, i.e. marketing, cultural policy, and theatrical communication. Theatre Talks have successfully combined those perspectives: they increased ticket sales among the participants (which means that they brought a revenue to the theatres and changed behaviours of the participants), they attracted non-theatre-goers to theatres (which adheres to the cultural policy goal of increasing participation and diversity in theatres), and they increased pleasure and understanding of performances among participants (which influences the process of theatrical communication on all three levels).

The reasons for Theatre Talks to be effective are many. I think it is important to stress three of them. Firstly, Theatre Talks puts the experience of the spectator at the forefront. It is the experience and not the understanding, which is valued – no matter what kind of experience it is. This makes spectators feel appreciated, which, in turn, makes the theatre a more approachable place for them. Secondly, Theatre Talks works for the benefit of both spectators and institutions. Theatres are given a chance to know their audiences, to hear what they have to say and provide them with whatever they need. They create the safe space, where the spectators can share their thoughts, ideas, and most importantly experiences. It is the space for mutual learning and building respectful relationships. Thirdly, Theatre Talks have proved to be fruitful in decreasing several barriers for non-attenders: financially, through providing free tickets to the performances, but more importantly, culturally, through

affecting spectators' conception of what it means to be a theatregoer, and if they could ever belong to this group.

In describing the effectiveness of Theatre Talks, I mostly focused on its audience development potential and down-toned its audience research aspect. While audience research should not be underestimated, it is important to remember that Theatre Talks constitute a qualitative method, not a quantitative one. It might be tempting for the institutions to modify the method and shift its focus away from the spectators' experiences as something of value in themselves by interfering and guiding their conversations towards topics that might appear more crucial from the institutional perspective. This way the Theatre Talks may change more into a focus group meeting covering topics that institution would like spectators to discuss. However, it is important to remember that there is no evidence that traditional focus groups can have an audience development potential. Therefore, it is crucial for the institution to know its goals (and audience development being one of them) before employing Theatre Talks.

While the method seems both promising and accessible to theatres, I see at least some questions that remain to be answered by research in the future, and which possibly could assist in developing the method and its applications further. Firstly – and this poses the most difficult challenge to the method – we do not know if Theatre Talks can be used for non-attenders with negative attitudes towards the theatre. Researchers noticed that those are the groups that are the most difficult to research, because they are simply not interested in theatre and are not willing to participate in the research projects. Is it conceivable that there are ways to modify the method in reaching those non-attenders? Or are they to be considered beyond the reach of Theatre Talks? Secondly, after seeing such good results in theatres, it would be interesting to see if Theatre Talks could be useful in other types of cultural institutions. My modest experience makes me believe that they are promising as a method for audience development in, for instance, museums and interdisciplinary arts festivals, but this assumption needs to be cooperated by empirical research. Theatre Talks proved to be effective development instrument for both theatre institutions and audiences, and I hope that they can be cultivated further in other artistic environments.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Susan Bennett, Willmar Sauter, and Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen for fruitful conversations that served as great inspiration for developing my thinking about Theatre Talks.

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