

## Education of Audiences- A Myth or a Missed Opportunity?

Saturday April 25 10:00-11:30

Moderator:

**Julia Carruthers** - London - Akram Khan Company <http://www.akramkhancompany.net>

Speakers:

**Lisa Hugosson** - Norsborg - Riksteatern, Swedish National Touring Theatre [www.riksteatern.se](http://www.riksteatern.se)

**Marcela Lukáčová** - Bratislava - Slovak National Museum <http://www.snm.sk>

This working group was an exchange of ideas, suggestions and experiences surrounding the all important question of growing and cultivating a new generation of involved, devoted, and informed audiences. This is also closely linked with bringing art and culture into a more prominent position in our society, and perhaps even the growth and development of the art and artists themselves. What can be done to ensure a vibrant, healthy future for the arts? It all begins, of course, with education.

“If schools don't include art and culture in their teaching, they educate only half people.”, opened Lisa Hugosson, the Head of the Youth and Children's Department of Riksteatern, the large theater association and performing company based in Sweden ([www.riksteatern.se](http://www.riksteatern.se)). Riksteatern makes it part of their mission to reach as much of the population with their theatrical works as possible, taking around 60 plays on tour to some 300 locations from large cities to small towns- and children are no exception. They perform for 45-50 thousand children per year, regardless of class or social situation, and through their work are able to raise important issues and bring artistic and cultural experiences to young people who would have never been exposed to such things otherwise, were reliant solely on the influence of their parents.

“Children are human beings, just like adults,” Ms. Hugosson says, “They cannot be protected from reality, but should be protected in support of reality.” The Riksteatern program designs shows for young audiences keeping in mind the specific issues that they may be dealing with in their own community- in larger cities concerns such as familial relations, sex, abuse and crime may be of bigger import, whereas in more rural areas land preservation, changing agricultural practices and the treatment of livestock may be more relevant topics of discussion.

Regardless of subject matter, the plays seek to reach children through methods that they can appreciate, relate to, and understand. “We need to access a language to express what we dare not talk about.” She says. Finding ways to communicate through art can open a whole world of possibilities concerning an art-centralized educational process. Children are natural artists, it is merely conditioning that stifles their creativity and places different notions of how to relate to the world in their minds. “We have to learn to communicate through art- what are the codes?” Ms. Hugosson believes that visual, movement, or musical language should be taught as well as the spoken and written ones, to encourage the use of art as a tool for communication and association to the world at large.

The works of Riksteatern are presented in conjunction with the schools, which sometimes proves to be a difficult relationship. Often teachers feel that they have little license or liberty to deal with sensitive or difficult subjects, because of the responsibility to their profession as molders of young minds. When asked what they thought their students needed to be exposed to to further their growth and development, every teacher responded “Are you asking me as me, or as a teacher?” Even in school presentations, children's natural responses are often suppressed, and a feeling of being in control must be maintained by school professionals.

In this, we hit upon the first, and possibly most important point in our quest to reach a younger generation and create a healthier relationship with art- integration in and communication

with the schools. Theaters and schools should have an equal understanding and respect for each others aims in educating youth and developing healthy, engaged members of society- an aim which is (hopefully) one and the same.

“Educators should be a part of the operations.” Agreed Marcela Lukàcovà of the Slovak National Museum ([www.snm.sk](http://www.snm.sk)). “The way to change things is through the cooperation of education and the arts. But who really needs the education?” Ms. Lukàcovà works with the Didart project ([www.didart.net](http://www.didart.net)), a very interesting and innovative multimedia tool for educators and children with an aim at educating and creating an understanding and respect for art, paving the way for a new generation of educated and involved audiences.

Didart creates a series of interactive CD-ROMs designed specifically for educators, which hosts texts and images of original experiences and projects related to contemporary art, interesting proposals for the activities of schools, museums and universities, and new ideas to work with the interactive and multimedia tools of Didart's web site. In this way, the project teaches teachers how to teach art- a subject which is often overlooked or misrepresented in public education.

Didart also produces a series of CD-Roms designed for young people themselves, though with they can have the freedom to explore the world of art in whatever way most interests them in relation to their own personal identity. The children choose topics like “Image” “Game” or “My World” to discover through images, texts, activities and games, the poetics of a contemporary artist and the basic ingredients of his or her art. This includes explorations of genres, virtual tours of world renowned museums and galleries, visits into artists homes, and “virtual classes”, in which a contemporary artist is interviewed by children about his or her work and process. The children can also personalise their experience by creating a profile with preferences and collections of materials they have gathered or created through their explorations.

“The aim is to educate confident consumers of art.” Ms. Lukàcovà said. The young audiences are invited to have a more personal experience of the art, which creates a greater connection to the work, as well as being given tools to appreciate it more, through the understanding of process and impetus.

At this point, Moderator Julia Carruthers suggested dividing the meeting into two groups to discuss the two methods of educating young audiences presented here: bringing the art to the children and letting them have their own experiences of it, as in the case of Riksteatern, or bringing the children to the art (virtually or otherwise) and educating them about how to view it, and what exactly it is they're looking at. There was an admittedly confused exchange of glances throughout the room. “Do we have to decide?” asked one member.

It was agreed that the two approaches to arts education both have validity. There is of course a credibility in allowing audiences, even young ones, to have their own interpretation and opinion about a work of art. In this way, an audience may find a more personalized connection than the one which may have been given to them through an explanation of the artist's intentions, or an awareness of it's process. The important factor here is convincing audiences that their opinions ARE valid and worthwhile. Teaching an engagement in artistic discourse can turn an audience member into a loyal subscriber, because through discourse and the sharing of opinions, the experience of the work continues outside of the theater or museum, and becomes a social occupation in and of itself.

On the other hand, giving audiences an in depth education regarding the history of artistic movements and works in their relation to time and place can also create an enriched experience of the work. Viewing, for instance, one of Van Gogh's last paintings before his suicide, or understanding the political and social circumstances surrounding the Dadaist Movement, invites the audience to have an enhanced appreciation of the work, in regards to it's process or impetus- perhaps sometimes these factors can be even more important or affecting than the product itself.

It seems that the question is not in choosing one method or another, but in focusing first and foremost on creating a strong and healthy connection between art and education, and so creating a substantial relationship between art and audience. This relationship is vital to maintaining or improving the precarious role art plays in our civilization as a whole, regarding its perceived

importance as an irreplaceable element of a well functioning society, as well as its potential to shape and change society itself- if we are not taught to pay attention and respect to art, perhaps it will be powerless to effect us. This precarious art-education-audience relationship is closely linked to the continued evolution and development of the art itself- interested, involved, and challenging audiences push an artist further, to explore new ways of engaging and effecting the world. An artist will push themselves further if they feel that the audience is truly with them.

So what are the tips in creating this all important relation? First, focus on creating greater respect and understanding between artists and educators- this is where it all begins. Also, the best way to reach young (and old) audiences is by creating works about subjects which are relevant to their lives, and to which they feel they can personally connect with- such as in the works of Riksteatern. In addition, strive to reach (especially young audiences) through the methods and modes through which they are accustomed to receiving their media and information- as Didart has dedicated itself to pursuing.

Hopefully, if we turn our attention to planting the seeds of an understanding and appreciation for the arts, we can grow a healthy forest of loyal, engaged consumers of art, thereby securing the position of our work in society for the future.

**Report by:**

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