

***Willmar in the World***  
***Young Scholars Exploring the Theatrical Event***

*A Festschrift for Willmar Sauter on his 60th Birthday*

**EXCERPT**

# ***Willmar in the World***

## **Editors**

Yael Feiler, *Stockholm University*  
Rikard Hoogland, *Stockholm University*  
Kalle Westerling, *Stockholm University*

## **Contributions by**

Denise Agiman, *Teatro Theatre Troupe, Canada*  
Liviu Dospinescu, *University of Ottawa*  
Anat Gesser-Edelsburg, *University of Haifa*  
Dirk Gindt, *Stockholm University*  
Michael P. Jaros, *University of California*  
Jacqueline Martin, *Queensland University of Technology*  
Smaragda Megalopoulou, *University of Helsinki*  
Ola Nordebo, *Stockholm University*  
Annelie Saro, *University of Tartu*  
Rebecca Scollen, *University of Southern Queensland*  
Matthias Warstat, *Freie Universität Berlin*  
Kalle Westerling, *Stockholm University*  
Farah Yeganeh, *University of Qom*

THEATRE AND DANCE STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF MUSICOLOGY AND PERFORMANCE STUDIES  
STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY



© The authors, 2007

ISBN: 978-91-976743-0-0

Printed by US-AB, Stockholm 2007.

Text design by Kalle Westerling

Cover: Private photo by Sylvia Sauter

**Published by**

Department of Musicology and Performance Studies

Theatre and Dance Studies

Stockholm University

SE-106 91 Stockholm

## *Theatre Talks Evolve into Talking Theatre*

Theatre audiences, and *potential* theatre audiences, are important to me. I believe that without an audience there is little point in performing, and without commitment to audience reception there is little point trying to evolve as an artist or theatre organization.

In my final undergraduate year (1994) studying Drama at the University of Southern Queensland in Australia, I undertook my first audience reception study. I created a questionnaire and surveyed the audience of five separate theatre productions to find out what impact the various theatrical components had on comprehension and enjoyment. Part of my preparation for this research was to undertake a literature review of past audience reception studies. This was my introduction to Willmar Sauter and a collection of other researchers based in Europe and the Netherlands.

By 1996, I was doing an honors degree in Theatre at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, under the tutorship of Dr Jacqueline Martin.<sup>1</sup> She had recently arrived back in Australia from her many years working in Sweden. It was through Jacqueline that I became further aware of Sauter's research. Willmar's Theatre Talks model interested me and I sought to find out if this model (or an adapted version of it) could operate successfully in Australia as a tool for building theatre audiences. This subject was to become the focus of my doctoral research.

The aim of my doctoral research (completed in 2002) was to arrive at an effective method for gathering and analyzing *non-theatregoers'* reception of theatrical performance. It was anticipated that this method would provide insight into non-theatregoers' reasons for non-attendance, into their reactions to theatre productions, and into the likelihood that they might change their attitudes towards theatregoing and become theatregoers in the future. It became evident from my literature search that audience reception studies of the past had focused their attention on regular theatregoers and their experiences. However, there appeared to be no published research about non-theatregoers and their experiences of theatre at this time. I believed that this data was valuable as it could provide detailed profiles of non-theatregoers, their reasons for non-attendance, and their reception of theatre productions and the act of theatregoing (when commenced under study conditions). This information could assist theatre companies to better understand how they and their work were perceived by the broader community. It could give clear direction for those who sought to attract and retain new audiences to ensure steady long term growth. This knowledge

could impact on the creation of new work, seasonal programming, marketing and promotion, pricing, and a range of other aspects associated with the theatre industry.

I also discovered that past audience reception studies tended to avoid post performance group discussions as a method for data retrieval. There was very little published research, besides the work of Sauter (1986), where post performance discussions were used to discover the immediate responses of audiences to live theatrical performance. Yet, theatre is a social event and the inclusion of friendly group discussions, rather than single interviews or questionnaires, suits the nature of the art form by allowing people to meet and communicate openly with one another.

So I created a combined methodical approach to audience reception by adapting and combining the methods of Sauter (1986), Lidstone (1996), Knodel (1993) and Krueger (1994), and the model of Miles and Huberman (1984). This approach consisted of a collection of questionnaires, a series of post performance group discussions, and analytical methods designed for examining qualitative data. This approach was tested and refined across three reception studies: a 1997 Pilot Study, a 1998 La Boite Theatre Study, and a 2000 Queensland Theatre Company Study.

#### SAUTER'S 1986 THEATRE TALKS METHOD

In the mid-1980s, Willmar Sauter and colleagues were eager to discover spectators' judgments of performances, and to find out the impact various theatrical elements had on these judgments (1986: 144). This information was to inform a report titled *The Theatre Audience – The Emotional and Intellectual Experience of Performances* (1986: 136). Sauter believed that spectators' reactions

to performance were of great interest once they had experienced an entire performance. He felt it was important to access these reactions immediately after a performance before the spectators had been affected by outside influences (1988: 453). Rather than use questionnaires which restricted individuals' expression and rather than use individual interviews that would take a long time, he decided to use Theatre Talks as a way to gather spontaneous reactions to performance.

The Theatre Talks consisted of groups of seven friends or associates who knew one another prior to the performance, who would speak together in a casual friendly atmosphere about the show they had all just seen. Sauter believed seven members would be a large enough group to stimulate conversation for one to one and a half hours of discussion, and would not be too large to cause fragmentation within the group (Sauter, 1986: 137). A group moderator was present at each of the group discussions and this person would record the session and ask questions on occasion to clarify responses or to redirect conversation if one person was dominating the group. »The idea was that the leaders (group moderators) should stimulate conversation between the participants without engaging themselves in it more than absolutely necessary« (Sauter, 1986: 138). The group members were encouraged to speak freely about the performance and to describe, interpret, and evaluate it without being asked specific, and possibly leading, questions by the moderator (1988: 453). Sauter (1988: 453) states:

The participants are free to respond to issues brought up by other members of the group, to remain silent while things are discussed which do not interest them, and to bring up any aspect of the performance they find essential.

Sauter gathered 175 participants to form 25 groups of seven individuals. All groups attended six productions within a period of seven weeks. The short period of time for the study was an attempt to prevent participants from increasing their theatre skills, which could affect the responses they would give over a long period. This tactic would also not allow patterns of reactions to re-appear at every meeting because it was thought the short time span would prevent such habits or trends occurring (Sauter, 1986: 139-140). The groups contained the same participants for the length of the study, and each group had a moderator as explained above.

Participants were categorized according to seven profiles created by the researcher. Each person was asked to provide personal information concerning his or her sex, age, education level, social status/income, socio-cultural activity, theatre preferences, and theatre habits (1988: 452). Those who took part in the study tended to work in institutions such as the following: private companies, state and community services, schools, and hospitals (1988: 453). It was important for Sauter that the groups be homogenous, and acquainted with each other quite well beforehand (1986: 137). One of the central reasons for this was that it is quite usual for couples and groups of friends to chat after a performance about their experiences. Sauter wished that his study would be as close to this common post performance reaction as possible to ensure spontaneous personal reactions would occur within a study framework. »Our aim was that the interview situation should not be too different from what theatre-goers normally would do« (Sauter, 1986: 137).

Sauter was keen to discover which elements of performance were most meaningful for spectators, and whether spectators



interpreted or evaluated these elements differently according to their profiles. Sauter discovered there was very little difference in experiences of performance between men and women (1988: 454). The results did indicate though that young people aged in their teenage years and early twenties did experience theatrical performances quite differently to those older than them (Sauter, 1988: 454). Those who rarely visited the theatre tended to enjoy comedies and light entertainments, compared to regular theatre-goers who appeared to prefer the more serious dramas (Sauter, 1988: 457). The results also indicated that productions were evaluated with regard to the acting quality in the performance (Sauter, 1986: 144). Sauter states:

The acting quality was almost entirely responsible for the overall impression of a performance (1986: 144). Remarkably enough, the rating of the drama is constantly lower than the rating of the actor, even lower than the evaluation of the performance (1988: 459).

Apart from generating huge amounts of data within a very short period of time, and arriving at detailed results for his report, Sauter had created a research method that was popular with participants. Sauter (1986: 138) discovered that »Most groups were very enthusiastic about this form of theatre visit and continued to practice Theatre Talks long after the project had come to an end«.

Sauter went on to conduct Theatre Talks for another large study in 1984 and 1985 for the Royal Opera in Stockholm. He then used the method in America with students at the University of California in 1985. In 1988, he tested the Theatre Talks model with university students in Utrecht. On all occasions he found the research method to be a successful tool to access the

reactions of spectators to performance immediately after the show has concluded. He also tested different ways of analyzing and reporting the data generated in the groups (1986: 143). Sauter (1986:143) asserts:

These experiments with Theatre Talks in various surroundings, with quite different purposes, have shown that Theatre Talks are an effective method of investigating spectators' experiences with all kinds of theatrical performances. Not least, it is a very pleasurable way of seeing theatre for those involved – no need to fill in forms (or) time for interviews, but you spend an evening with your friends talking about a common experience.

#### CHANGES TO THEATRE TALKS

Prior to its use in my doctoral research, Sauter's 1986 Theatre Talks method had demonstrated its worth as a tool for gathering audiences' reception of live performances. However, it was unclear how effective the method would be if applied to non-theatre-goers. Non-theatre-goers in my doctoral research were defined as people who never attended theatrical performances or who attended once a year on average. The Theatre Talks method was adapted in my research to incorporate larger groups of people in the post performance discussions. Those participating in the groups were non-theatre-goers and were strangers to one another, which was different from Sauter's study sample. Unlike Sauter's participants who attended a Theatre Talk once a week for six weeks, the participants in this research took part in a post performance discussion once a month. Sauter's moderators conducted the talks in quick succession so the participants would not acquire increased theatre skills. This differed from the aims of this research, which sought to discover whether repeat visits to the

theatre and participation in the discussions would help non-theatre-goers to learn about theatre. The role of the facilitator in this research was adapted to create a more passive group leader, who would not ask participants to address specific aspects of performance in discussion. However, the facilitator remained within the circle of participants, encouraged them to speak and provide examples from the performances, and actively listened to their comments so they felt that their opinions were of value to the researcher and the theatre companies they visited.

The adaptations to the methods of Sauter and Lidstone were successful because the post performance discussions were well attended and highly enjoyed by group members, who all actively participated in the discussions. The inclusion of non-theatre-goers in the discussions led to their increased knowledge of theatre and confidence in theatre-going. This was because they learnt from listening to other people's opinions and from expressing their own ideas to others. They actively participated by asking questions of one another and by explaining why they held particular beliefs about the performances. The non-theatre-goers were active because the facilitator did not play a dominant role. Although I, as facilitator, played a passive role, I was always seated amongst the participants and showed interest in their conversations by gaining eye contact and smiling. This ensured that the participants were comfortable at the discussions, which helped them to accept the active role they were to assume and so they talked amongst themselves. The fact that they were placed in groups with strangers, unlike the participants in Sauter's groups, appeared to increase their confidence in theatre-going dramatically. Great satisfaction was gained when strangers agreed with their interpretations of the productions.

Central findings of this research included the formation of a non-theatre-goer profile; an understanding of how non-theatre-goers perceive performances; the discovery that gender, age, and income did not appear to have direct impact on theatre attendance or reception of theatrical performance; confirmation that exposure to performance and an arts education increases interest and confidence in theatre-going; forty-five percent of the sample returned outside of study conditions to purchase tickets for themselves and for other non-theatre-goers who were to attend with them; and that self and peer education was an effective way for non-theatre-goers to learn about theatre.

At the conclusion of my doctoral thesis I was in a position to name my tested audience development method: the Scollen Post Performance Audience Reception (SPPAR) method. SPPAR was the culmination of extensive experimenting and refinement of an adaptation of Sauter's (1986) Theatre Talks model in combination with other adapted focus group and qualitative analysis models. The success of SPPAR when applied in professional Brisbane theatre companies during my doctoral research led to a much larger audience reception study of non-theatre-goers living in regional Australia.

#### THE TALKING THEATRE PROJECT

In 2004 I was awarded an Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship by the Australian Research Council to apply the SPPAR method in a three-year audience development project.<sup>2</sup> *Talking Theatre: An audience development programme for regional Queensland and the Northern Territory* (2004-2006) was funded by the Australian Research Council, Northern Australian Regional Performing

Arts Centres Association (NARPACA), Arts Queensland, Arts Northern Territory, and the Queensland University of Technology.

The Talking Theatre project sought to build new audiences both in the short and long term for the fourteen regional Performing Arts Centres (PACs) associated with the project. The research endeavored to develop a profile of non-theatre-goers in regional areas, to understand their reasons for non-attendance, and to discover their reactions to live performances, and to the PACs who presented them.

The goal of the Talking Theatre project was to make contact with regional non-theatre-goers and to uncover their attitudes to the performing arts industry and in particular to the fourteen participating PACs; including their programming, pricing, promotion, and facilities. By listening to the views of the selected participants in each of the regions, the PACs were placed in a stronger position to make effective decisions to positively impact on this significant segment of the community – interested non-theatre-goers.

For participants in the Talking Theatre project, the research provided them with the opportunity to directly experience live performances in a theatre setting. This introduction worked to break down some of the barriers that have prevented their attendance in the past. The post performance group data-gathering sessions provided a safe and friendly discussion environment which assisted the participants, via self-reflection and engagement with others' ideas, to learn about theatre and theatre-going.

Quality feedback from interested non-theatre-goers to the PACs, combined with participants' direct engagement with a range of performances, the PACs, and the perspectives of other

non-theatre-goers, created a meaningful two-way dialogue that helped each party to learn from the other and to feel valued by the other. This sharing of information led to increased understanding of non-theatre-goers and their needs by the PACs, as well as an increased interest by the participants in live performances and a greater confidence to attend outside of research conditions. Furthermore, the research findings and recommendations guided the State and Federal Government funding agencies' future interaction with the PACs and with diverse regional communities to continue to improve participation levels of Australians in the arts.

Of note since March 2004, the Talking Theatre project has generated a 110% increase in ticket purchases by all participants in the project. Twenty-nine percent of all participants returned, on average more than once, which is 177% up on their previous attendance. Factoring in the guests that they brought with them, results in a ticket multiplier of 397% per participant (or a ratio of 3.97 to 1). New family and friends have now been introduced to the PACs, and may return with guests of their own.

#### NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE

It is now the beginning of 2007 and I am seated in a different office in a different university. The Talking Theatre project was successfully completed at the end of 2006 and fortunately for me I commenced a new position straightaway. I am now Artsworx Manager at the University of Southern Queensland (back where I did my undergraduate Drama degree). This position sees me manage the production house that delivers a range of creative arts annual events and activities from the Faculty of Arts at the university. It is a position that calls on me to assist to build new

audiences and to strongly engage with local communities, amongst many other things. I know that it has been my commitment to audience research, to regional communities, and to inspiring artists and arts organizations to try harder to produce relevant and satisfying arts experiences that secured the position for me.

I take this opportunity to thank Willmar for his commitment to audience research and reception. I thank Willmar for providing the Theatre Talks model which inspired me to see if it, or an adaptation of it, could be applied to build new audiences in a country on the other side of the world. I thank Willmar for examining my doctoral thesis and for providing such positive feedback. Willmar, your commitment to audience reception carries on through me as I continue to be passionate about audiences and *potential* audiences.

#### WORKS CITED

- Knodel, J (1993) »The design and analysis of focus group studies: A practical approach« in Morgan D.L (ed.) *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*, California: SAGE Publications pp. 35-50.
- Krueger, R. A. (1994) (2nd Ed) *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, London: SAGE Publications.
- Krueger, R. A. (1993) »Quality control in focus groups research« in Morgan, D.L (ed.) *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*, California: SAGE Publications pp. 65-88.
- Lidstone, J. (1996) »Synergetic Focus Group Discussions: Rapid Access to Rich Data«, in Gerber, R. & Williams, M. *Qualitative Research in Geographical Education*, Armidale: University of New England Press pp. 159 – 168.

- Miles, M. B. and Huberman, A. M. (1984) *Qualitative Data Analysis*, Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications.
- Sauter, W. (1986) »Theatre Talks: Or How to Find Out What the Spectator Thinks« in *Nordic Theatre Studies: Advances in Reception and Audience Research* vol. 5, pp. 136 -145.
- Sauter, W. (1987) *Braaavo! En studie över publiken på Operan i Stockholm [A Study of the Audience of the Royal Opera in Stockholm]*, Stockholm: Kungliga Teatern.
- Sauter, W. (ed.) (1988) »The Eye of the Theatre« in *Nordic Theatre Studies: Advances in Reception and Audience Research*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 17 – 26.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline was also to become my Ph.D. supervisor.

<sup>2</sup> Dr Jacqueline Martin was the first-named chief investigator, and Profs. Jennifer Radbourne and Brad Haseman were also chief investigators on the project.