

Closer to home

Executive Director of Riksteatern, Birgitta Englin examines how to share public space and unleash innovation and excellence

BY allowing the arts to act as a 'mirror', aiming to reflect society of today, is most likely an efficient way to prevent the arts from actively challenging and reconstructing our joint communities. This 'mirror' is also of passive nature, and is not accessible enough to give the sector a crucial public acknowledgement for true reflections, since the image it reflects is too homogenous and exclusive.

We need to realise that public funding demands interested and participating citizens.

The challenge that culture sector faces is to stop mirroring a hierarchical and gatekeeping society and to start shaping a sector that acknowledges the value in peoples' participation. Therefore, the perception of conflict between artistic excellence and broadened participation is absurd and only appropriate in an undemocratic and unequal society.

We need citizens' competence and creativity as much as we need them paying taxes and tickets; filling the auditoriums. A public and active ownership where citizens have influence on the cultural infrastructure and content will also legitimise further public and private funding of the arts.



The Riksteatern-led project, Influence! brings young people in Gottsunda, a suburb of Uppsala, closer to cultural policies and local politicians

The golden days of full public financing of the arts are gone due to recession and austere policy making. At Riksteatern, we have shed tears of frustration, anger and nostalgia. They faded away quickly when Riksteatern became more aware and appreciative of our human resources. They are the sources of strength and wealth within the diversity of Riksteatern. From the hamlets to the metropolises of Sweden, together we have analysed the reflections of the current state of affairs and the vision of our shared future.

Our analysis is that 'majority norms' are constructed and rather irrelevant. By claiming to secure the interest of a majority, we would suppress vital creativity, competence and talent.

Riksteatern, like Europe, faces a diverse and global society where cultural understanding and competence is pivotal to European development. I believe that in a society with a diversity of realities and norms, the culture sector has the possibility to become the arena where the Queer activist and the conservative Christian can negotiate shared responsibilities for a democratic society. Thus, they provide a forum for their children to respect each other while finding common denominators that improve the lives of both communities.

The role and relevance of culture in displaying societal challenges has often and traditionally taken place inside the theatre. Riksteatern contributes regularly to a diversified repertoire. However, we are equally curious and engaged in innovative projects that take place outside of the theatre. We invest in projects that do more than mirroring some form of reality or norm.

Initiatives, such as the Riksteatern-project Influence!, bring young people closer to their local politicians where they contribute with suggestions of improvement to the cultural plans of their region. The project reveals the possibility to take necessary steps from accessibility, to participation, to influence. The need to influence has more to do with the urge to be part of a greater goal, and less to do with securing one's own interest.

With influence comes responsibility. With responsibility, you grow. Without influence and responsibility, you remain infantile and feel powerless. Therefore, when facing art that aims to mirror your 'reality', without prior input and engagement from you or your community, you feel shame or even outrage.

In my experience, one of the main challenges we are facing in Sweden and Europe is the lack of public forums where innovation can organically grow and be nurtured into concrete projects.

Sweden, which tops the list of innovative economies in Europe, encompasses all the potentials to create more innovation hubs in the public sphere. Today, vast parts of innovative spaces are within the realm of the private sector. Private investment in R&D and innovation is positive; however, it also makes its sustainability and survival vulnerable if these companies decide to leave the country.

Social innovation, a flagship priority of EU-strategies can be reached on more levels in our society, if we provide appropriate and experiment-friendly environments and infrastructures. Here, the culture sector has much to offer when it comes to artistic intervention and inclusive methodologies.

Methods that teach us to demonstrate empathy and to constructively express our fears and concerns are fundamental in confronting societal challenges. The culture sector, through traditional storytelling, as well as participatory methodologies brings forward a number of ‘forgotten’ narratives and creative alternatives. These scenarios could be used in prevention work, such as reducing the rate of burnout in medical staff (<http://artsinmedicine.unm.edu/ArticleStressNurses.pdf>), preparatory projects in city planning (www.planning.org/research/arts/briefingpapers/overview.htm), or reconciliation processes and people-to-people diplomacy (www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy).

Today, Riksteatern and many other state-funded culture institutes in Sweden receive overarching directives by the government. They identify areas of common interests, such as gender equality, education, integration, accessibility etc. It is encouraging that the political sphere acknowledges the potential and significance of the arts for enabling objectives of other political strands. However, we seldom move a step further together through co-operation and shared resources. The arts’ and cultures’ entrance and engagement in political spheres, e.g. health education, would enable greater public influence, resource efficiency and institutional transparency.

Audience and arena-building, in real life or virtual spaces, require a process of expansion and exploration. Through outreach and empowering activities Riksteatern encourage young people to cross borders, mentally and geographically. Meanwhile Riksteatern is equally encouraged to cross borders. Situated in Botkyrka municipality, a suburb of Stockholm, where an average 16-year-old speaks three languages, it is obvious that this suburban resource holds a key to the world outside of Sweden and Europe.

Riksteatern needs to improve its exchange with the world outside of Europe. We need the 16-year-olds, and so does the EU.

One of our more recent projects, Europe Direct Riksteatern, an info-desk partially financed by the EU-Commission, aspires to better identify and disseminate the local resources. The 150 plus nationalities with access to prioritised languages, cultural understanding and global networks, are traditionally a resource that many companies and institutions are willing to pay dearly for while headhunting. They are also traditionally, and regrettably, social groups that are systematically ignored and excluded.

Fact sheet – Riksteatern/National Touring Theatre of Sweden

- Established in 1933 as a non-profit touring theatre;
- Today owned by 236 local theatre associations around Sweden;
- Annual outreach/audience in Sweden: 1.2 million;
- National assignments (*inter alia*): to (co)produce, organise, promote and tour performing arts throughout Sweden, to develop infrastructure for participation of all inhabitants in culture and arts, to develop and make available Riksteatern’s expertise in modern dance, deaf culture, theatre for children and youth, and international and intercultural performing arts. Tyst teater/Silent Theatre (theatre in sign language), The Cullberg Ballet and Södra Teatern, Stockholm’s international stage, are parts of Riksteatern.

More information on: www.riksteatern.se
Europe Direct Riksteatern: <http://europadirekt.riksteatern.se>
Influence!: <http://inflytandeprojektet.riksteatern.se>

The entire process of enabling access, participation and influence is a three-part methodology that we would like to explore further in various settings, i.e. citizen dialogues/councils, the Diaspora-communities, the city planning department, or the board of a private company. It would invite the public to an ownership of the artistic process, as well as experimental responses to societal challenges.

If innovation has been identified as the mean and the goal to take Europe out of crisis, then we must increase all chances that enable the inflow of ideas. This requires opening up the ‘innovation labs’. The late Nobel laureate in economy, Elinor Ostrom, insisted on more local and regional influence and solutions in regards to climate change. Her prescription goes well with other processes for democracy, welfare and sustainability. Her concept of finding solutions that ensure public access to the Commons (water, air etc) is based on the same citizens that utilise the Commons. “We can’t just sit around and wait for the global solution”, she expressed. So, let the citizens become more integrated in opening up our shared spaces for innovation, experience and excellence exchanges. Undoubtedly great art and culture will follow.



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