



Participatory Theatre



**Suggestions and recommendations for
publicly funded theatres, policy makers
and funders at the local, national and
European level**



This paper distils ideas and recommendations for Participatory Theatre.

Since 2017, the European Theatre Convention has developed “ENGAGE – empowering today’s audiences through challenging theatre”, thanks to a co-funding by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. It is an international programme for European theatres to diversify their artistic work and professional context, to offer theatre as an open, social and democratic space for exchange and reflexion. The programme focused on three aesthetic practices and a core principle, jointly identified by ETC and its member theatres, who researched, developed, tested and co-created internationally in the following fields: youth theatre, participatory theatre, digital theatre and diversity in theatre.

ETC focused with the ‘Our Stage’ programme on participatory theatre to reach out to, involve and empower existing and new audiences. The suggestions arising from the project are presented as an advocacy plan aimed at theatres, funders and policy makers, sharing the most important project learning.

Since the ENGAGE programme, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated new modes of artistic research and development, so that engagement through research, development, testing and co-creation can continue across international projects. The learning and

recommendations for participatory theatre have created a valuable knowledge resource for theatre practitioners and policymakers, which can be further built on in the new context.



ETC Ecosystem

International Collaboration in Theatre
The Our Stage Project

Cross-border level of creative research



- Kick-Off Workshop (1)
- Productions (6)
- Festival (1)

Timeline





Suggestions for theatres, policy makers, funders and EU level

Understand the agenda[s]

- » The ETC Casebook Participatory Theatre sets out the diverse approaches and agendas which inform the development of and current drivers in participatory theatre across Europe. Understanding this is important and professionals should use the casebook research to learn more.
- » One definition or understanding of participatory theatre emphasizes horizontal thinking, where participation equals being part of something bigger, involving shared experiences, identities, feelings of belonging and community. Participation in a cultural activity or institution is promoted and measured by cultural institutions (and their funders) as a strategy to increase audience numbers and the associated income, and/or from a commitment to cultural participation as a general human right and need (articulated in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights).
- » A second understanding is described as democratic, being more focused on the distribution of power, and where meaningful participation is defined as sharing power. Here, the concept is that participatory practices – for cultural institutions and citizen participation in theatre – require visible citizen influence on/control of decisions, resources and outcomes. Therefore, ownership, power and agency are key elements in this democratic

understanding of the concept, in order to achieve a full or true participation.

- » Given these two main strands of understanding, citizen participation in theatre productions, and in cultural institutions generally, can be seen as a strategy to facilitate inclusion and social interaction, strengthening belonging and community. It can also be seen as an answer to the frustration and powerlessness generated by growing inequalities and exclusion, in which case a more democratic participation approach is required to create space for citizens' voices, influence and agency in decision-making around specific theatre projects and the institution. In each case, enabling, developing and supporting a sense of agency among the participants is fundamental.

Focus on process aligned with high production standards

- » Allow time for the process. Participatory theatre places a strong attention on the process of devising and presenting work. A citizen participation production may take more time to plan and achieve, and usually requires additional inputs from the cultural institution team compared to a regular production.
- » Ensure that the theatre's professional production values and high artistic standards are applied to participatory theatre projects. This reflects an organisation's commitment to participants, audiences and the work.
- » Make sure the financial and organisational implications of time allocation and production values are taken into account by the institution, funders and policy makers.



Suggestions for publicly funded theatres

Create an integrated institutional approach to participatory practice

- » Cultural institutions may be engaged in one or other of the two main described approaches. If citizens are invited to participate in a theatre project, are they also invited to participate in key decisions about the production, or about the institution more generally? How much agency do they have in the process? This is an important question to guide the institutional approach to participatory practice and understand who is empowering whom.
- » It is crucial to take the professional ensemble's concerns on board when developing participatory practices. A solid, institution-wide understanding of the organisation's participation strategy is essential, so that professionals engaged by the theatre do not fear less recognition when amateurs are engaged in stage productions. This will help articulate shared values and identify the organisational needs to develop participatory theatre projects. It will also underpin appraisal of new project funding opportunities, to ensure they meet the organisation's objectives.
- » Look at any changes required at organisational level to foster a strong institutional commitment to participatory theatre, e.g. providing the time and staff engagement needed to support the process of an extended production period. Ensure flexibility is built in to respond to the unexpected.

- » Consider how the work is communicated to audiences and build this in at an early stage to ensure the appropriate channels and messages are used.
- » Take into account the possibility that a participatory agenda may lead to a more radical transformation of a cultural institution, through challenges to traditional professional practices and established distinctions between institution and citizen, professional and amateur, expert knowledge and everyday experience. It can shape the working structure of the institution, across all levels.

Expand critical thinking through international collaboration in participatory theatre

- » Take a closer look at the language of participatory theatre. There are different terms and labels, some of which translate better than others for good understanding across European partner projects. Bürgerbühne (or Bürger*innenbühne), translated as citizens' stage, is an important German model of participatory theatre, sometimes used as an umbrella description.
- » Other terms identified in the research to define participatory theatre include autoethnographic theatre, documentary theatre, reality theatre, community theatre, social theatre of art and theatre of frailties.
- » Some theatre directors use one defining term and absolutely reject others, so it is essential to agree on a shared language of participation approach.
- » Intersectionality, decolonisation (and associated agendas of anti-colonisation, post-colonisation) and exotification are other

concepts that require critical thinking in addressing participation and representation.

Consider the political aspect of participatory theatre

- » Participatory theatre has a strong implicit activist character for many practitioners. Creating space for real people to speak about their reality uses the stage as a public political space. Some institutions have discovered a new understanding of the stage as a space to take a position and cultivate political consciousness. There is a political choice to be made in how you choose to do participatory theatre. Engaging in a dialogue with a community that uncovers and exposes new narratives is an act of being political.
- » Look at where participatory theatre is positioned, in relation to international collaboration projects, as its status and voice varies across Europe. In some European countries, participatory theatre is advocated within the independent sector, due to a lack of state support for this type of work, and it often takes a political stance to challenge the status quo.
- » Consider how participatory theatre can be developed as a strategy to change and challenge the theatrical landscape. Creative practitioners and cultural institutions have an important role in seeking out new stories and giving a platform to marginalised voices.

Take inspiration from contemporary digital culture

- » Look at contemporary digital culture for models of how participation and social media engagement drive and thrive on user involvement and user-generated content. Consider how these new participatory practices have at times generated problematic

responses, some more problematic sides and what this implies for theatre.

Collaborate and share working methods with European partners

- » Collaborate with partners on the challenges and solutions for bringing local productions to the European and global stage. The experience of European co-productions in participatory theatre to date has been modest due to financial, organisational and content challenges.
- » Share working methods, partners, role models and structures for participatory theatre work in order to help develop understanding and strengthen the European idea. A unifying social motivation connects the diverse practices.
- » Develop and share transparent selection criteria for any open call – and evaluate their effectiveness. For example, the Our Stage Bürgerbühne Festival, a citizen's stage developed as part of the Our Stage project, devised a strong set of selection criteria for the open call. Organisers found half the submissions did not meet these, being mostly amateur work or 'not yet professional' proposals. The key question the festival addressed regarded the specific aesthetic treatment of the non-professional at the level of content and presentation.

Suggestions for policymakers and funders at local and national levels, and at EU level

Recognise

- » Across Europe, there is a demand for institutions to engage citizens as active participants. Participatory theatre reflects wider societal concerns. It can address inclusion and diversity issues and challenge unequal participation levels in arts and culture.

Facilitate and enable

- » Participatory theatre can create safe spaces for intercultural dialogue and diversity of cultural expressions, focused on societal and generational realities and challenges.

Communicate and share

- » Look at the different levels of support and experience in policy and funding for participatory theatre across Europe for learning and inspiration. Policymakers and funders can learn from each other, e.g. the experience in Flanders since 2008 where participation is now a core requirement for cultural funding and fully integrated into everyday arts practices, as well as in the school curriculum.
- » Consider creating new funding instruments to support participatory formats, building on experiences from European countries, such as Belgium, France and the UK. Take inspiration from the citizen stages in Germany which have grown over the past 10 years.

- » Understand the high level of interest in and expansion of participatory arts formats. Use this to inform future policy and funding programmes.

Support

- » Encourage formats for collaboration and co-production between Creative Europe countries in participatory performance work (while taking into consideration different contexts between countries). This is recommended to further advance this work, enhance learning and achieve wider objectives.
- » The Covid-19 pandemic has isolated performing arts institutions from their audiences and wider communities. The long periods of lockdown imposed on theatres and cultural institutions – which vary across Europe – require dedicated transition support to recreate the institutions, their participation strategies and connections with audiences. Support for participatory theatre projects can help communities reconnect and reintegrate human and artistic relations during and after the pandemic. Theatres and cultural institutions are valuable hubs to foster participation and facilitate the wider recovery process.



Conclusion

In general, funding and support schemes at European, national and regional levels should take into consideration that the production of interdisciplinary, international projects need a long-term approach.

ETC's goal is to show that European initiatives – both on the political and artistic levels – fuel changes among the individuals and professionals involved, as well as at national level. Such European initiatives reinforce a European dimension, and reach wider groups of citizens in the process. It is therefore essential to enable and support international collaboration and the exchange of work practices. Continued and expanded international cooperation is necessary to create theatre for the future.

ETC has committed itself to working in this direction while continuing to address the question of participatory theatre in its programmes and advocacy actions.

More ETC Publications

ETC Journals

ENGAGE – Designing the New Decade (2020/21)

ENGAGE – Europe on Stage (2019/20)

ENGAGE – International Programme for European Theatres (2018/19)

ENGAGE – Empowering Today's Audiences Through Challenging Theatre (2017/18)

Casebooks

Youth Theatre – A Casebook (2020)

Participatory Theatre – A Casebook (2020)

Digital Theatre – A Casebook (2018)

Policy Papers

Gender Equality & Diversity in Theatre (2021)

Youth Theatre (2021)

Participatory Theatre (2021)

Drama goes digital vs. Theatre invades digital (2018)

Research

Gender Equality & Diversity in European Theatres – A Study (2021)

The Art of Ageing – Bringing the Burning Issue of Global

Demographic Change on Europe's Stages. Creative Research – a Documentary by the European Theatre Convention (2015)

Audiences for European Theatres. Study on Audience

Development and Research in the ETC (2015)

European Drama

Theatre is Dialogue – Awakening. New Horizons in the Independent Theatre Scene in Ukraine (2017)

Young Europe – European Drama Repertoire for Young Audiences.

A Selection of Five Plays From Cyprus, France, Germany and the Netherlands. Theater der Zeit (2013)



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ETC Contact

European Theatre Convention

Head office

c/o Deutsches Theater, Schumannstr. 13a, 10117 Berlin

EU office

c/o European House for Culture, Sainctelettesquare 17, 1000 Brussels

+49 (0)30 284 41 460

convention@europeantheatre.eu

www.europeantheatre.eu

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Executive Director: Heidi Wiley

Written & edited by Judith Staines in collaboration with On The Move (Marie Le Sourd) and ETC (Hélène Gauthier, Christy Romer, Teresa Pfaud), with input from the ETC Casebook "Participatory Theatre", edited in cooperation with the ETC Our Stage project partners.

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