Interactivity that matters

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Abstract

Skilfully applied, interactivity is an ingredient that may boost engagement and enhance the performance experience of a young audience. However, it can also lead to confusion, banalisation and even embarrassment. What are the parameters for interactivity to be experienced as meaningful, and when is it unproductive?

In this article I shall address how conceptions of artistic quality are challenged by contemporary practices of interactivity and audience participation in theatre for young audiences. The question will be discussed in relation to three performing arts productions presented in The Cultural Schoolbag (TCS): one participatory theatre performance and two interactive digital productions. The latter two were developed as part of Kulturtanken – Arts for Young Audiences Norway’s 3-year development project in digital mediation, FoNT (Formidling og Ny Teknologi/Mediation and New Technology). Equipped with theories of games and play, I shall discuss how the three projects succeed in presenting the kids with opportunities for meaningful interaction. I conclude by pointing out some of the parameters that are vital in order to provide meaningful interaction in performing arts aimed at a young audience – interactions that matter.

Om forfatteren

Interactivity that matters

The Cultural Schoolbag (TCS) is an ambitious, nationwide programme that includes all school children in Norway, providing them every year with a wide variety of art experiences, during their time at school. The programming of TCS is performed locally in municipalities and county municipalities all around Norway. Kulturtanken, a government agency under the Ministry of Culture, holds national responsibility for TCS. An important part of Kulturtanken’s mandate is to ensure that TCS fulfils its ambition of providing the pupils with art experiences of excellent quality, by instigating, supporting, and carrying out projects in cooperation with local TCS administrations, researchers and research institutions, higher art and teacher educational institutions, art institutions and organisations, artists, producers and others whose everyday work is related to The Cultural Schoolbag.

From 2018 to 2020, Kulturtanken ran the project FoNT: Formidling og Ny Teknologi, roughly translating to Mediation and New Technology. The aim of the project was to investigate how new media technologies could be employed as mediational tools to help improve the communication between the works of art and the audience of pupils and teachers. Explaining this in English is always a bit awkward since the central term “formidling” does not have a direct equivalent in English. It describes the process by which the work of art is rendered accessible to its audience, in a material, cognitive and emotional sense.

FoNT resulted in ten pilot projects, initiated by local TCS administrations, and developed using a close collaboration model involving Kulturtanken, TCS administrations in municipalities or county municipalities, and an art institution or artists. Kulturtanken contributed with administrative, financial, and technical support.

“Artistic” and “mediational” quality

One central focus in this article is how the concept of quality is challenged in today’s theatre, by new trends of audience participation. The concept of “quality” concerns, in this context, both the artwork itself (artistic quality), and how it is communicated to the children (which we, for lack of a better term, translate as mediational quality).

However, neither “artistic quality” nor “mediational quality” are unambiguous and straightforward terms. They are also mutually dependent on each other in the sense that artistic quality can be an objective fact and yet unrecognised by the audience subject experiencing it if the mediational quality is lacking.

Furthermore, artistic quality rests on norms for artistic practice that depend upon and vary between historical traditions and art forms. To recognise and appreciate artistic quality often demands familiarity with the type of artistic expression in question.

To articulate the specific artistic qualities of a theatre performance, a skilled reading of the work is required, where the work is related to other works and evaluated according to a set of
standards relevant to its genre or tradition. The artistic qualities of a theatre performance inscribing itself into one tradition cannot adequately be evaluated according to standards and criteria belonging to a different tradition. Quite on the contrary, as pointed out by professor in theatre Tore Vagn Lid while referring to the tension between a dramatic and a postdramatic paradigm, “what is from one perspective valued as qualities in a performance is from another perspective dismissed as weaknesses[...]”

In a similar vein, contemporary practices of audience participation in theatre for young audiences challenge conceptions of artistic quality by undermining the standards and criteria for “good art” established by mainstream (dramatic as well as postdramatic) theatre. To adequately judge and relate qualities characteristic of participatory and interactive art, we may need an alternative set of tools and criteria that enable us to recognise these artistic practices on their own terms, and to acknowledge and recognise their most essential artistic qualities.

Interactivity and audience participation

In the last 10-20 years, forms of audience participation have been popular strategies to engage audiences both in theatre and in the visual arts. This is even more true for theatre and arts aimed at young audiences. Audience participation and interactivity may be included in the performing arts in a number of ways, more or less controlled and more or less tightly integrated.

In their article titled “The SceSam Project – Interactive Dramaturgies in Performing Arts for Children”, Lise Hovik and Lisa Marie Nagel present a model of six dramaturgical forms, spanning from closed, artistically predetermined works to more open works. At one end of the spectrum, inviting the audience to silent spectatorship and contemplation, at the other end, allowing the audience to actively participate in the configuration and co-creation of the artistic work. The three works that will be discussed in the present study all employ open dramaturgical forms, either dialogical or by engaging the kids in an improvisational creative collaboration.

Hovik and Nagel point out that even though interactivity and audience participation are regarded as desirable qualities in theatre for young audiences, there are several ways interactivity and audience participation can misfire and ruin the performance experience rather than add to it. In other words, interactivity and audience participation is no guarantee for a qualitatively superior art experience. Rather, interactivity and audience participation make up artistic tools, means and modes that must be carefully monitored and balanced in order to achieve their desired effects in and on the art experience. While sounding rather obvious, it may still be necessary to stress this point, as a certain political bias can be detected towards audience participation as the desired mode of presenting and communicating art to young audiences. This is not least prevalent in The Cultural Schoolbag, where there is an explicit ambition, and several strategic projects exploring new methods of enhancing the level of participation by children and young people.

1 Lid “Kvalitetsbegrepenes dramaturgi”, 122 (my translation).
3 Hovik and Nagel “The SceSam project”. The model is available online here: http://teaterfor.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SceSam-Working-Model.pdf
There is, however, no reason to believe that enhancing the levels of participation by children and young people will automatically improve the quality of the artistic and cultural experiences provided in The Cultural Schoolbag. Naturally, and unfortunately, things are more complicated.

**Objective and subjective quality**

Quality is undoubtedly a difficult and, in many ways, contested concept to use in relation to art and aesthetic experience. It is provocative when applied normatively as part of a value judgement. However, it also has a less provocative descriptive function, when applied as a value-neutral characterisation of specific features of a performance.\(^5\)

Furthermore, the concept of quality is fundamentally ambiguous in that it can refer to an objective as well as a subjective reality. An audience that is witness to artistic quality in an objective sense may fail to experience it as such, precisely because the concept of artistic quality rests on norms for artistic practice that depend upon and vary between historical traditions and art forms. To recognise and appreciate artistic quality demands familiarity with the type of artistic expression in question. As interactive and participatory performances represent a (relatively) new and divergent aesthetic practice, it can be challenging to identify and articulate the qualities that separate a qualitatively good interactive performance from one which is not, from both an objective point of view, and also from a more subjective point of view.

Objective criteria for artistic quality can, in principle, be judged independently of the critic’s personal aesthetic experience of the performance. Objective criteria refer to aesthetic conventions and norms that define the artistic tradition in which the work in question is inscribed. To provide a simple example, in French classicist drama, the unity of time, place and action described in Aristotle’s *Poetics* were norms of artistic quality that could be objectively evaluated.

However, such objective criteria are seldom as clearly defined in the theatre of today. Contemporary participatory theatre is often inspired by social experiments and relational aesthetics from the field of visual arts.\(^6\) By crossing disciplinary lines, they are hybrid expressions that do not unambiguously conform to any defined, formal aesthetic. Their artistic quality may therefore be difficult to evaluate according to formal, objective criteria. The controversy between art historian Claire Bishop and theatre scholar Shannon Jackson on the aesthetic value of certain social works of art, including Jackson’s attempt to unravel Bishop’s alternating quality criteria, offers an intriguing example of how art-works considered good from a theatre scholar’s point of view may appear aesthetically worthless from a visual arts perspective.\(^7\) Often in these cases, quality evaluation seems to boil down to the critic’s subjective aesthetic experience.

When we as adults need to evaluate the artistic quality of performances addressing a young audience, we must be especially careful if all we have to base our evaluation on is our own,


\(^6\) Bishop, *Artificial Hells*; Jackson, *Social Works*.

\(^7\) Jackson, *Social Works*, 48.
subjective aesthetic experience of the performance. Our experience might not be representative of, or even relevant to, how the target audience experience the performance. It is much easier for us if we have objective, formal criteria to rely on, not least because, as cultural workers, we often have an arts education, and are familiar with formal aesthetic evaluation criteria. We have the tools to make objective evaluations of artistic quality, but we do not always have the adequate tools to evaluate the aesthetic quality of the performance judged from the perspective of the target audience. This may represent a more subjective experience, which is inaccessible to us (due to age, taste, experience, lifeworld, etc.)

For the children and young people concerned, the situation is reversed. They are the target audience, so their subjective aesthetic experience of the performance is undeniably relevant. However, they often lack the tools to evaluate artistic quality from a more objective, formal point of view. Moreover, they often lack the tools to recognise and articulate their own aesthetic experience, and what they perceive as the essential aesthetic qualities in their encounters with art.

**Game studies terminology**

Qualitatively, I believe that the aesthetic experience of being engaged in interactive and participatory works of art can be compared productively to that of being engaged in play. This is hardly a controversial statement, as aesthetic engagement has often been related to and likened to a state of play, referring to the aesthetic theories of, for example, Friedrich Schiller and Hans-Georg Gadamer. If the aesthetic experience of ordinary, non-interactive works of art can fruitfully be likened to a state of play, then interactive art engagement can certainly be approached in the same way.

Interactive and participatory performances are, in this approach, understood as performances that prepare or open up a type of possibility space in which the audience is invited to engage in meaningful play and to experience being-in-play. Being-in-play is the particular kind of aesthetic experience where you are so fully integrated in play that it is no longer possible to say whether you are playing the game, or the game is playing you. It is also an entirely irrelevant question, as in this state, the play itself is all that matters.

Referring to theories by posthumanist Karen Barad, there is an increasing tendency today among artists and scholars working with concepts of interactivity and participation to replace the concept of interactivity with that of intra-activity. Where interactivity can be understood as describing interaction between separate entities, the term intra-activity accentuates the intra-dependency of agents belonging to the same system. Admittedly, measured up against each other this way, intra-activity seems to reflect the notion of being-in-play even more precisely than interactivity does and may well come to replace the term in the long run. For the present study, however, I will continue to use interactivity as my central term.

Theory and terminology from the multidisciplinary field of game studies are useful to help grasp how such interactivity works in a material sense as well as in being a source for aesthetic

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8 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity.”
9 See for example Østern and Hovik, “Med-koreografi og med-dramaturgi som diffraksjon.”
experience. In approaching participatory and interactive performances as performances that establish a certain type of possibility space in which meaningful play can occur, I employ the following two game studies terms: *possibility space* and *meaningful play*, which will be described below.

Essentially, the term *possibility space* refers to a visualisation of all possible moves and states within a defined game space; representing the full range of interactions and possible outcomes available to the player. A well-crafted possibility space therefore constrains a player’s actions, and within a range that they understand clearly.\(^\text{10}\)

Possibility space can be understood literally as a physical space to explore, or metaphorically as a conceptual, narrative, or fictional space to explore. Playing is, in this terminology, understood as interactively exploring potential possibility spaces.

*Meaningful play* in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and a system responds to the action. The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relation between action and outcome.\(^\text{11}\)

Thus, meaningful play is not necessarily about creating meaning in a narrative or cognitive sense of the term. Rather, it is about providing meaningful interaction; a sensation that one’s actions are motivated by the play and responded to in a meaningful and adequate manner.

There are, however, different ways of being engaged in play, which has consequences for how we are able to evaluate the quality of the play experience. In the following sections, I will illustrate this argument with three examples of participatory performances aimed at a young audience, two of which are digital and parts of the FoNT project, with the third being a theatre performance presented as part of the regular TCS programme.

**Who Are You?**

The first work, titled *Who are you?*, was initiated in 2018 by Møre og Romsdal County Municipality, in collaboration with the regional theatre, Teatret vårt. A section of Teatret vårt is devoted to creating theatre exclusively for young audiences and has its own artistic director. In 2018, the artistic director was Cecilie Lundsholt, a bold and dedicated explorer of new technologies in theatre.

\(^{10}\) Gunson, “Exploring possibility spaces,” *Shape of Play*. 19. 04. 2022. [https://shapeofplay.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/possibility-space/#comments](https://shapeofplay.wordpress.com/2013/08/02/possibility-space/#comments)

Their proposal to Kulturtanken was to employ interactive technologies to create an app that could support pupils and their teachers in better understanding and communicating about the theatre performance, *Lars er LOL*, which would be performed by the theatre in the upcoming TCS season.

*Lars er LOL* is based on a children’s novel by Iben Akerlie. The main character is a young girl who is challenged by social circumstances at school and must make a choice as to whether she would rather remain popular among the other popular pupils, and betray someone who likes and trusts her, or whether she should instead stand up for herself and her friend, risking her social position at school. It is a moral dilemma about choosing the right course of action despite the fact that doing so will most certainly ruin her social reputation.

The *Who Are You?* app was developed by Cecilie Lundsholt in collaboration with interactive media artist and programmer Petr Svarovsky. The project’s main objective was to create a mediational/educational tool for the theatre performance that the children would want to engage with, independent of any pressure or guidance from their teacher (as would be the case in a normal classroom situation). Thus, a game was created. In the game, the pupils are approached by an artificial intelligence called Marius, who tells them that he needs to learn about humanity and ethics. As Marius’ brain is artificial and not human, he is not able to think quite like a human being, especially not when it comes to moral questions. Fearing that his inability to discern between right and wrong might make Marius dangerous, his creator thinks he should be deleted. However, Marius hopes that if he can learn to think like a human, his creator will let him continue existing.

Approaching them through the app on their phones or on their PCs, Marius asks the pupils a series of ethical questions: is it sometimes okay to lie? For example, is it okay to lie to protect someone? The children must answer each question in order to keep the conversation going. Their answers – yes or no – will decide the course of the conversation, and how the game ultimately ends: whether Marius will be allowed to continue existing or not.
Who Are You? Photo: Erik Fosheim Brandsborg/Kulturtanken

The theatre performance *Lars er LOL* is based on a novel protected by copyright, and the game could therefore not contain any direct references to its fictional universe. Instead, Lundsholt and Svarovsky invented a different, unique concept that made it possible to reflect upon and prepare the ground for discussions about ethical dilemmas central in the performance, without directly referring to them. After the app was released as part of the theatre performance’s tour with TCS, my Kulturtanken colleague Charlotte Blanche Myrvold and I visited two classes to observe how the game would be received, and to what extent it would succeed in facilitating conversation about the key topics of the theatre performance. We observed the pupils as they interacted with the app in class and interviewed a group of four pupils after the session. There was no doubt that the pupils found the game engaging and an apt conversation starter. The teachers, some of whom had been sceptical at first about introducing the pupils to a game during their school day, expressed excitement and surprise that the game and conversation with Marius had turned out to be such a useful tool in making the pupils reflect realistically upon netiquette, a central topic in the curriculum of the 5th grade. It is also a central topic in the theatre performance, where the bullying of and by the protagonist takes place online.

In developing *Who are you?* an important objective was that the pupils should experience agency – i.e. that their choices had actual consequences to the course of the game – as a sense of true agency is vital to the experience of being-in-play. An indication of this interactive experience’s artistic and mediational success was obtained when pupils, immersed in playing, suddenly panic
as the fake artificial intelligence Marius claims to have hacked their phones. They were no longer merely playing the game but being played by it.

**Bubble Jam**

The second FoNT project was proposed by Asker Municipality, which wanted to translate a work by the Rimini Protokoll, called *Bubble Jam*, adapt it to a Norwegian context and explore it with high school students as part of The Cultural Schoolbag. The German theatre company Rimini Protokoll has a long tradition of employing elements from game design in the unique kind of personal/political documentary theatre that they have developed. Their pieces are often designed to evolve around a number of personal questions that the participating audience are asked. Often, the audience is involved early on in the development of the performance concept. From a participating audience’s point of view, it is therefore not always clear whether a performance one participates in is just another test of the concept or game design, or whether it is in fact the real thing, the performance as it is supposed to be. I will come back to this point later.

This is how *Bubble Jam* is presented on Rimini Protokoll’s website:

*Who is on the other end of the internet?*

*How does an algorithm work?*

*Who, or what, is giving us directions?*

*And who, or what, is fake here?*

*Bubble Jam turns the internet into a chamber theatre.*

*Bubble Jam is a game platform. Its servers connect test players (12 and up) via smartphones that they are supplied with. They follow the chat of developers, who are located elsewhere, and respond to their directions and questions to create a perfect round of *Bubble Jam*: What should it be about? Nightmares? Friends that you’ve never seen? Photos that suddenly emerge? About what “type” you are? Or about that fact that life goes on?*

*Bubble Jam measures the responses and determines from them who should discuss what with whom. Questions are derived from poll results about how to proceed: *Who is playing? And whom is being played with?***

I have participated in the game as a (test) player and have also observed one of the first rounds of testing the concept on high school pupils in Asker. I was very curious to see how it would

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12 Rimini Protokoll, *Bubble Jam*. 


develop. Unfortunately, travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have delayed the process and prevented it from being realised in TCS, at least so far.

The first rounds that I participated in as a (test) player and an observer were not very promising, however. As a player/participant, it was hard to grasp the concept, and we never came to the point of being-in-play. The fact that Bubble Jam is advertised as a game creates expectations of a functional game design. When it didn’t function accordingly, and the expected experience of being-in-play failed to appear, testing it as a player was like testing an un-finished game concept. Personally, I had high expectations as to what could potentially be gained, as I had recently experienced a truly magical moment of being played in another participatory performance by Rimini Protokoll called Society under construction (State 2), at Norway’s National Theatre in September 2019. Here, the entire audience were divided into groups of participants holding the function of construction workers at different building sites. The groups moved from site to site, each performing their function. Suddenly, I experienced a moment of epiphany where I could grasp, in a glimpse, my role in it all, and how my actions mattered to the performance as a whole, as a functional part of the big theatre machinery. Admittedly, this was not an interactive performance: the participatory audience didn’t really have material agency to influence the course of action of the performance, but could merely play along, fulfilling their assigned function. However, in playing its audience, the performance nevertheless succeeded, at a point, in giving me a fleeting illusion of being-in-play. Thus I think the crucial factor is to experience agency, even if in this case, our agency was merely a theatrical illusion.

In a thoroughly scripted performance such as Society under construction, the possibility space for the audience participants is clearly defined and fixed. Whereas the first rounds of Bubble Jam felt like testing, and not really playing, which was primarily due to the exact opposite situation, where the range of the possibility space was unclear to the participants.

When the range and confines of the possibility space are unclear, it is difficult to identify motivations for action. In particular, it is difficult to identify what kind of actions will generate a response from the system so that meaningful play can occur. Without clear motivations, it feels awkward, even embarrassing, to act as a participating audience: one simply does not know how to act, or which role to assume in order to instigate play. When in a state of being-in-play, it is as if the game plays itself effortlessly. Giving oneself up to play is to forget oneself. Struggling to come into play is, on the contrary, a situation of awkward self-awareness.

Crime and Punishment

My third example of a participatory performance experience aimed at a young audience is not a game, but a party. It is part of a trilogy called The Classics Played for Kids by the Norwegian theatre director, Hildur Kristinsdottir. This one was Crime and Punishment by Dostoevsky, and is the last classic in the series, following Goethe’s Faust, and Virginia Wolf’s To the Lighthouse.

The performance of Crime and Punishment consists of three parts: the first part is a more or less traditional theatre performance with actors on stage performing the play while the audience are silently watching. Qualitatively, this part can be evaluated according to established aesthetic
criteria reflective of the postdramatic theatrical genre into which the performance inscribes itself. In part two, however, the stage is transformed into a party venue with confetti, slushies, and popcorn. The audience is invited to collectively perform an intricately choreographed segment led by one of the characters from the theatre play; to participate in singing/shouting Ebba Grön’s punk classic “Staten och kapitalet”; as well as to write and post political slogans, promoting issues important to them. Part two thus implies a reorientation from contemplative aesthetic experience to social interaction, where the audience is invited to socialise as well as to engage politically in addressing social problems.


Part three of the performance attempts to lift this social engagement out of the theatre space and into real life: on their way out, each audience member is presented with a letter from the director, explaining that the third part of the performance is an individual journey in which they will have to be both actor and audience, as well as director.
Despite being praised by some critics as the most successful of the three *Classics Played for Kids*,\(^{13}\) *Crime and Punishment* received a mixed response from the cultural establishment. Most would agree that the first part, the theatrical performance, was a major work of art. The second and third parts, however, appeared to be more difficult to conceptualise and evaluate as theatrical works. It didn’t help that in part two, the social situation into which the participants were thrown was clearly designed for an audience of young people. The critical cultural establishment, however, consists primarily of grown-ups who suddenly found themselves embarrassingly out of place, not at all capable of living up to the youthful engagement and cheerfulness expected of them as participants.\(^{14}\) The range of the possibility space was clearly enough defined, the problem was rather that they didn’t feel comfortable playing this kind of game.

**Evaluating the quality of play**

*Who Are You, Bubble Jam*, and part two of *Crime and Punishment* all engage the audience in play, activating or attempting to activate their play skills. However, they do so in very different ways.

In evaluating the quality of the three participatory works, we encounter different problems, depending on how the play experience they provide is structured. When it has the structure of a rule-based game, as in *Who are you?* and *Bubble Jam*, the quality of the play can be objectively evaluated based on the internal flow of the game mechanics. It is possible to objectively judge if challenges and potential solutions are well-balanced, that is, whether or not it is a well-composed game. In the same vein, it is possible to objectively evaluate a performance conforming to a well-defined tradition or genre, such as part one of *Crime and Punishment*, deciding whether or not it is a well-composed work of its kind.

Because we can objectively evaluate whether a game succeeds in providing meaningful play, it is possible to evaluate the artistic quality of *Bubble Jam* without necessarily belonging to the targeted audience group. We can, to a certain extent, rely on objective criteria when evaluating the quality of the performance. I say “to a certain extent” because there are of course also other qualities to the performance, qualities that cannot necessarily be objectively evaluated.

In works that are not composed as rule-based games, but instead invite the audience into a kind of free play, the aesthetic experience is of a much more subjective kind. *Crime and Punishment* part two is an example of such a work. As adults, we may participate in the party, but if it feels awkward to be singing and dancing and shouting political slogans as if we were teenagers again, it might be exactly because we are not teenagers anymore. Most likely we need to be part of the target group in order to be able to relevantly evaluate the kind of aesthetic experience a work of this kind offers.

This could be an argument for letting the young people themselves do the evaluation. However, a potential problem with such an approach is that young people often lack the tools to evaluate artistic quality from a more objective, formal point of view. They also often lack the tools to

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\(^{13}\) See for example Lauvstad, “Klassikere for Kids avsluttes på topp”.

\(^{14}\) Nystøyl, «Å åpne verden», 83.
recognise and articulate their own aesthetic experience, and what they perceive as the essential aesthetic qualities in their encounters with art.\textsuperscript{15}

**Interactivity that matters**

What then, defines the successful employment of interactivity in performance? As I see it, the most crucial parameter is to provide the participants with an experience of true agency, and a sense that their input matters to the performance as a collaborative aesthetic experience.

Interactions that matter create meaningful play. These are interactions that have a material effect on the system of rules, the network of links, the infrastructure of actors, or whatever kind of system this participatory performance sets in play: when the player has a clear experience of how their agency and role in the performance is connected to the rest, as a part of the bigger machinery.

Interactivity matters when the participating audience in an interactive performance experience being a functional part of the defined possibility space, and that their actions matter, as a significant part of the bigger picture. To the extent that the partying audience in *Crime and Punishment* experienced being part of an organism, a community of agents, their interactivity mattered.

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\textsuperscript{15} In collaboration with the University of Agder and The Research Council of Norway, Kulturtanken has funded a PhD project investigating how children and young people approach the question of quality when they experience art, and how they can be better equipped to articulate their art experiences. Theatre critic Anette Therese Pettersen, whose MA was in Theatre Studies, has defined the research questions and is working as a PhD research fellow to carry out the project. By developing courses in performative theatre criticism, she is investigating how expressing and reflecting upon the art experience can be a method of strengthening the competence and confidence with which young people encounter and address art experiences in and outside TCS.
Bibliography


