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PERFORMANCE DESIGN

15 års alfabet

Kolofon

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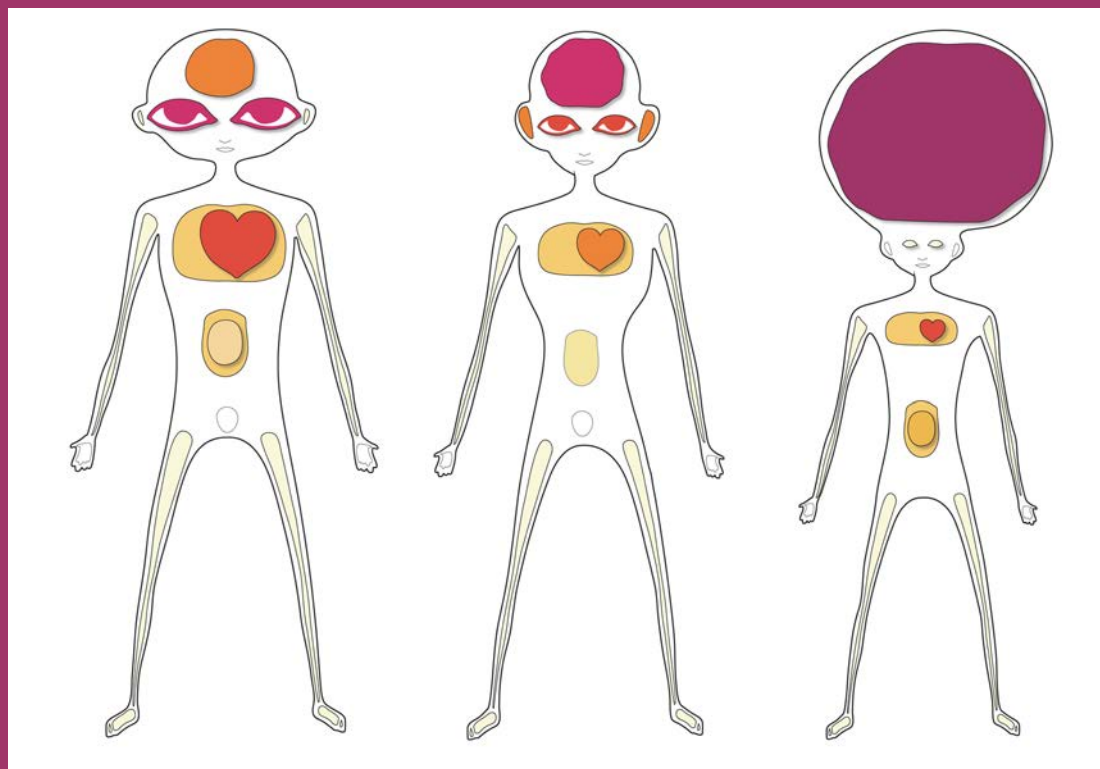
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WHERE IN YOUR BODY

Af Matthew Reason



In 2017 I sent out a single-question online survey to audience member attending theatre, opera and ballet performances at the Royal Danish Theatre. The survey explained itself, in Danish, as follows:

Having watched [performance name], we hope you can spare a minute to answer just ONE question about the production:

Where in your body would you locate your experience of watching the performance?

This might seem like an odd question, and we know it can be difficult to select just one answer, but we are interested in how it makes you consider your experience of the performance. Maybe you felt it in your brain, your heart, your toes or somewhere else?

There are just three elements to our survey:

- 1. CLICK on the circle corresponding to the body below.*
- 2. FILL in the box on the following screen briefly giving an explanation for your answer.*
- 3. EXPLORE other spectators' responses to the same question.*

THIS QUESTION, 'Where in your body?' for short, is one I've been asking audiences, both face-to-face and via this online survey, for the last four years. To date I've gathered over 3,000 spectators' responses, with 1,297 of these coming from Danish audiences. The collaboration with the RDT, however, was the first time that I'd asked opera, theatre and ballet audiences the question in parallel. The 'homunculus' figures above show the results, with the shape of the alien-like characters scaled by size and colour according to the frequency with which spectators selected each particular body area – heart, brain, gut, eyes, ears, legs and so on.

The teasing question for you to consider as you read this article is which figure represents ballet, which theatre,

and which opera? I'll come back to that later.

More significantly however I want to think about the nature of the question itself. I'm interested in what this question *does*, in how it works, and the kind of thinking it produces. It is, after all, a fairly odd and to be frank peculiar question in the first place. Indeed, one anonymous peer-reviewer for a journal to which I'd submitted an article stated that the 'Where in your body?' question was perhaps 'the most ridiculous and non-sensical' they had ever come across. They refused to accept the article on this basis.

This peer review response made me think. I had developed the question somewhat instinctively, but now I was required to defend it, to consciously and rationally justify why it was valid to ask participants such a peculiar thing.

As a starting point I would agree that asking spectators 'Where in your body?' they experienced a performance is in many way ridiculous and non-sensical. Even if we accept that the experience was taking place in the audience members' bodies, itself contentious, participants would have no conscious access to any physiological or psychological answer. Any answer they provide almost by definition would not be literally truthful.

However, the question should not be taken literally. Nor do I think the audiences which responded were under the illusion that the question was after any kind of physiological or psychological truth. Instead its intention was to elicit a response in a playful, perhaps provocative, perhaps surprising manner. It hoped to invite participants to reflect consciously and actively on their experience. The unusual nature of the question was an invitation to do

so imaginative, creatively, playfully. It was designed to elicit what we might think of as 'emergent outcomes', that is original, creative, insightful and transformatory ideas or action that are produced through innovative thinking.

Tellingly, while occasionally there are some responses dismissive of the question itself ('With respect, it's a bit of a weird question'), as we shall see a large number of spectators seem not to have any trouble answering it or understanding what it was trying to do.

I'll continue with another anecdote. I was attending a performance by the Rosie Kay Dance Company, who had included the 'Where in your body?' question and an accompanying visual graphic on the back page of their programme. During the interval a couple behind me started talking about the question. Their conversation began with puzzlement, moved through into possibly jokey non-serious responses, and then entered into a much longer discussion about how they might answer. The movement in thinking here is interesting, containing both elements of the inconsequentially playful and the seriously reflective.

This role of playfulness in research is something that I've become increasingly interested in. Asking 'Where in your body?' is playful in part because it is faintly ridiculous. And in part because it is markedly different from the typical post performance surveys that audiences receive. Additionally, however, it operates at a level of metaphor, couched in the manner of the 'what if' or 'as if' questions that drive children's imaginative play.

Assertions of the centrality of play and play-like attitudes to how we know and explore the world around us run through philosophical and educational

thought, from Johan Huizinga's articulation in *Homo Ludens* of the importance of play in culture, to the educational approaches of Fredrick Froebel. Few would disagree with Derek Phillips declaration in *Abandoning Method* that 'a playful attitude is a necessary precondition for "experiencing" the world.' Or skipping into the realm of philosophical thought, Heidegger seems to suggest that meditative thinking is a form of 'play of Being' that cannot be rationalised. In his discussion of Heidegger, John Caputo remarks that 'The play of Being means that we must surrender every "why?" and remain content with "because"' (1978: 83). This I find oddly satisfying, perhaps not least as that almost petulant 'because' reminds me of a response often prevalent in children's playful thinking. Why is the sun green? Because. Why does that robot have fish for arms? Because.

Creative or emergent thinking, in other words, requires a kind of playfulness, which recognises that where you end up is not where you began or even where you expected to be heading. To return to Caputo's explication of Heidegger, a 'leap of thought' is a necessarily creative, projective, anti-rational process of speculation or play. 'A leap always involves a discontinuity in which one reaches a point where one can only throw oneself over to the other side.'

Asking 'Where in your body?' invites and requires and enables audience members to engage in this kind of leap of thought. Of throwing oneself into the question – into discontinuity – not knowing where it will go but taking that journey at once playfully and seriously.

This philosophy and pedagogy of play is today the cornerstone of much pro-

gressive education and approaches to children's learning. Yet when it comes to adults, when it comes to research, when it comes to the serious business of methodology... not so much. There are of course exceptions, such as Lego's Serious Play concept, but it seems to me that approaches orientated around playfulness are too often neglected in the serious business of conducting serious research.

To return to 'Where in your body?'

When using the survey, the Royal Danish Theatre decided to conduct the 'Where in your body?' survey in parallel to a more traditional online survey, asking half their audience each one kind of question. In discussing the findings Nina Gram, of the Royal Danish Theatre, explores a number of aspects.¹ Amongst these she notes that audiences members sent the 'Where in your body?' survey were more likely to respond (30% compared to 16%) and amongst those who did respond more likely to leave a comment (80% compared to 40%) and that these comments tended to be longer. Amongst these responses every single body area was selected by a least one person, from hands:

HANDS: It was an amazing and fun experience. The libretto is a bit crazy, but the music is well known to me. This version of The Journey to Reims gave me a sense of being a part of the performance. My hands wanted to paint, put on clothes, move the props around, and grab after the paintings etc. [...] Compared to earlier, more traditional experiences, this opera felt almost including – without,

however, I felt the need to sing. I felt more like painting. Perhaps the audience should all have had a sketchbook in our hands?

To torso:

TORSO: My personal centre is my torso. This is where I sense that something is right and good – that is where my joy springs from

To groin:

GROIN: I felt it all the way down in my groin... the feelings that were portrayed and the stories of the dancers in the Pas de deux. It was a magnificent evening, wonderful costumes, and excellent dancing to great music!

To nowhere:

NOWHERE: It was an interesting production, but it also required a bit of reflection. It didn't touch my heart and it didn't give me goose bumps, but I don't think this opera is supposed to.

The responses, Gram, notes, are far more personal than those received from the traditional audience survey, closer 'to the qualities of a personal conversation'. She concludes her discussion with the remarks:

What we have learned is when we ask the audience a personal and unexpected question they will start reflecting and in return give us a personal, relevant, and sometimes unexpected answer.

Such unexpected answers represent emergent thinking, produced by question that in its playfulness is firstly inviting and relational, and which

¹When we ask about your body... A suitcase of methods, report #10. <https://asuicaseofmethods.files.wordpress.com/2017/07/report-10.pdf>

“WE RECOGNISE THAT ATTITUDES OF PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS ARE CENTRAL TO CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DISCOVERY OF THE WORLD, YET SEEM TO NEGLECT THEM WHEN WE BECOME ADULTS AND STUDENTS AND RESEARCHERS”

secondly elicits a kind of creative thinking. Rather than reaching for the already known, for the perfunctory, for the purely evaluative, audience members engage with their experiences in an active and reflective inquiry.

Further analysis and discussion of audience responses to this question are possible, particularly in terms of how the three most frequently selected body parts – brains, heart, gut – align

in the textual comments with three broadly definable categories of responses – the analytical, the emotional, the embodied.

What, however, of the three homunculi for the different experiences of ballet, opera and theatre?

It is, of course, a ridiculous comparison, as the responses aren’t for ballet, opera and theatre in any general sense, but in terms of a very specific ballet (Balanchine’s *Jewels*), a specific opera (Rossini’s *The Journey to Reims*) and a specific play (*Terror* by Ferdinand von Schiarch). *Terror*, in particular, perhaps skewed results, as this was a courtroom-based production in which the audience are cast as the jury and required to vote at the end of the performance. With this knowledge it should be easy to identify that the large brained figure on the right is theatre, as one spectator commented:

BRAINS: Because I had to relate to complex ethical dilemmas. I usually, with productions from The Royal Danish Theatre, wouldn’t answer BRAINS, but yesterday the brain was dominant. The play required a detailed understanding of the law, structures in our society, and ethics. You couldn’t just sit back and relax

As for the other two figures? The left-hand figure with the big heart and wide eyes represents ballet, metaphorical for the visual spectacle the performance presented and the emotional connection to experiences of beauty and joy. Or as one spectator put it:

HEART: I was moved by the beautiful costumes and the dancers’ love of dancing.

Finally, the middle figure is opera, a more diverse spread of selections through eyes, ears, heart and mind perhaps representative of the multi-art form, multi-sensory nature of the opera performance.

There is, I would suggest, a kind of fuzzy truth here. We got to opera to experience something that engages us as both visual and auditory delight; we often hope that theatre will make us think; while ballet can produce a heartfelt, emotional connections. At the same time just as with the question as a whole, we should take this as playfully serious, not literally serious. The comparison across the three figures is a playful invitation to think about the spectatorial relationship between different art forms and different experiences, to think in a manner that is generative, speculative (what if), but not singular or goal-orientated. To think in a manner that is, like play itself, autotelic. The thinking is its own reward.

Stepping away from this one very peculiar but productive question, I am going to end with a playfully polemical call. We recognise that attitudes of play and playfulness are central to children's learning and discovery of the world, yet seem to neglect them when we become adults and students and researchers. Let's reverse that. Let's have more playful questions, playful thinking, playful researching.

A longer version of the discussion on Playful Research will be published in *Impacting Audience*, edited by Dani Synder-Young and Matt Omasta. Routledge 2020.

Matthew Reason is professor of Theatre and Performance at York St John University. He researches across a range of issues relating to theatre and dance, with a recurring focus on audiences and particularly interested in experiential, embodied and interpretative responses to performance and in developing interesting ways of working with audiences to uncover these. Matthew was a visiting professor at Performance Design, Roskilde, in 2013.



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