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Toward a New We: Applied Theatre as Integration

**ABSTRACT**

This article presents the Norwegian applied theatre project called P:UNKT which suggests a meeting point, a crossroads and encounters. The aim of the project was to stimulate integration and cultural diversity, the outreach nature of P:UNKT resulting in new ways of interaction and collaboration across groups and institutions. I conducted research on the project from 2010 to 2012 and three years after in 2016. I claim that the project enabled ethnic Norwegians and immigrants to create unique storytelling theatre together that transcended the conventional preconceptions of us-them, a new we emerging through this. This type of social and applied theatre run by a professional, state-funded theatre is not common in Norway. The findings of my research are therefore of relevance to local communities, theatre companies and politicians. The P:UNKT project is an example of the active role applied theatre can play in shaping Norwegian identity construction in the 21st century.

**Introduction**

Akershus Theatre wanted, in 2007, to support integration and cultural diversity in Akershus, a county that surrounds the Norwegian capital of Oslo. Artistic director Bjørn Birch brought together a team of applied theatre practitioners to form the P:UNKT project, the aim of which was to produce theatre with non-professionals with Norwegian and immigrant backgrounds. Performances were to be based on participants’ life stories, the intention being to equate immigrants with ethnic Norwegians. When I first heard about the project, I recognized an attitude to outreach theatre that was similar to the type of practice I was involved in the 1980s and 1990s. My experience is that working professionally with non-professionals has had little recognition in Norway and low status. This is confirmed by Øystein Stene (2015) in his book *Skuespillerkunsten* *(The Art of Acting)*. He writes that Norwegian professional theatre artists have avoided working with amateurs, but that this also has changed radically in recent years (Stene 2015: 309). The motivation behind my research was therefore to reconnect with and draw attention to this unknown tradition in Norwegian theatre.

In this article, I want to look at the political and cultural conditions of the project and describe the project and my research findings. My intention is to demonstrate how P:UNKT can be seen as an example of applied theatre and the pro-active role it can play in Norwegian identity construction in the 21st century. I have published two papers on my research into P:UNKT. The first appeared in the *Nordic Theatre Studies’* special edition on theatre and democracy and was focussed on the professional theatre (Bruun 2014). The second, published in the Norwegian anthology *Drama, teater og demokrati* *(Drama, Theatre and Democracy)* (Bruun 2017), focussed on the dynamic relationship between cultural and political performance. For this article, I adopt a new research angle that focuses on the impact of collective identity construction.

**Research method**

According to John Carroll, a case study provides the opportunity to use an open and flexible research approach that recognizes the ongoing discussions required within a specific context (Carroll 1996: 77). The case is a dynamic and continuous creation in which not only the researcher but all involved affect the process. It is therefore relevant to place both the theatre project and my research into this form of social constructivism. John Heron and Peter Reason claim that we all are fellow players and performers in our own and other’s stories (Heron and Reason 1997: 272–294). Taking each individual’s story seriously is therefore a significant research method and a narrative approach that reflects a democratic and non-hierarchical research position.

My empirical data from 2010 to 2012 consisted of questionnaires sent to 35 individuals and responded to by 21. I also conducted three group interviews with four different people in each group, 15 individual interviews and participated in five seminars (planning, study trip, evaluations) with the artistic team and the artistic director. I compiled a personal log from around 20 rehearsals, which included participant observations and informal conversations and I facilitated two workshops (one with the youth group and one with the whole ensemble). There was also extensive e-mail correspondence and telephone calls with the artistic director, producer and two of the directors/dramaturgs. I carried out a further questionnaire survey in 2016 to find out more about the impact of the project over time. 12 participants responded. I applied principles to the analysis that safeguarded the flexible research approach and the equivalence of the different types of empirical data.

It was important, when I started the research, to stimulate interest in the researcher role. I was therefore often just present without an agenda. It also seemed useful that I participated in and facilitated practice. This helped build trust, particularly the trust of the professional practitioners. A researcher being present was new to all, including the artistic director. One of the first conversations I had with a young girl from Iraq illustrates unfamiliarity with the researcher role and demonstrates the reality of conducting research outside of academia and with people with limited Norwegian. It became clear in the course of the conversation that she thought I was a journalist from the state television broadcaster NRK and thought that the interview would be broadcast on television. I became, through this, even more aware of my obligation to exercise continuous self-reflection on my researcher role. I did this at a number of levels, including as artistic consultant and dramaturge with knowledge of similar projects from my own career and from elsewhere in the world. I also encouraged the continuous reflection of all involved, which was of value as it contributed to the project being experienced and seen in a wider democratic cultural political context.

**Theoretical perspectives**

I brought Helen Nicholson's term *the gift of theatre* into the dialogue (Nicholson 2005). This is a concept that is relevant to professional theatre practice with non-professional participants and performers. Nicholson’s concept is, however, a two-edged sword. There is a risk that professional practitioners indoctrinate and taint recipients with their own taste and way of thinking, which can occur without them being aware of or wanting this and often whilst motivated by the best intentions. On-going reflection in the professional team on working methods, production structure and artistic choices is therefore important. Thompson and Schechner describe in the essay ‘Why “Social Theatre”?’ (2004) the widespread, international field of social theatre, which aims to make a difference within the society of which it is a part. Their description of social theatre is very reminiscent of P:UNKT. Thompson and Schechner recommend symmetric and inclusive ways of collaboration when working with non-professionals. They furthermore state that ‘by creating a theatre of, by, and with silenced, marginalized, and oppressed peoples, social theatre workers assert that we all can experience performance in a broader and deeper way than before’ (Thompson and Schechner 2004: 16). I relate this to the dramaturgy of ritual and the notion of *communitas* (Turner 1982). *Communitas* relates to a group’s qualitative transformation and insight. This is corroborated by Schechner and Thompson who claim that applied theatre can create a completely new and deep feeling of belonging across groups of professionals and non-professionals (Thompson and Schechner 2004: 16).

Schechner and Thompson’s approach is in line with Wilmar Sauter’s view of theatre as *cultural performance* (Sauter 2008: 31). Sauter defines *cultural performance* (based on the anthropologist Milton Singer) as society’s self-representation. *Playing culture* describes the complexity in projects that involve everyday life performance as much as the mediated staging of theatre (Sauter 2008: 31). A sharp boundary between life processes and symbolic expressions is neither possible nor desirable in this type of cultural practice. This seems particularly relevant to applied theatre practice such as P:UNKT with an explicit agenda to contribute to integration. With Sauter’s lens, P:UNKT can be seen as a complex drama that is continuously being created, unfolded and negotiated. Sauter’s model of *playing culture* (Sauter 2008: 31) emphasizes the many layers of staging and performance in applied theatre.

**Norwegian cultural-political context**

Akershus Theatre was founded in 2003 as a regional theatre for the county of Akershus. Originally, it was a community-based theatre and part of the so-called all-encompassing theatre policy of the 1980s. This comprehensive, national strategy for theatre arts attempted to break down boundaries between elitist and popular culture. Akershus Theatre, like other theatres with the same background, is therefore the result of a cultural-political intention that differs from that of the major national theatre institutions. A key aspect of this is the notion of popular theatre that can be traced back to 1949 and the establishing of Riksteatret (The National touring theatre) as a *theatre for the people.* This trend was not unique to Norway, but part of the post-war democracy project in Europe and elsewhere in the second half of the last century. Norwegian democratic thinking embraced the ideals of building from the bottom up, instead of overriding local communities with centralised directions. This development is presented by Ellen Aslaksen in *Teater ut til bygd og by* *(Theatre out to rural and urban communities)* (2007). She points out that there was a paradigm shift in the 1970s and early 1980s, the new organisation models for Norwegian theatre meaning new goals and a shift from distribution of theatre to citizens’ participation in cultural democracy (Aslaksen 2007: 18). The implementation of the all-embracing theatre policy led to regional theatres and community-based theatres being set up all around the country to strengthen local ownership and participation. Similar cultural-political intentions emerge (well over thirty years later) in recent governmental documents (Kulturdepartementet 2014) and reflect global trends in the new millennium, the emphasis being on building a strong infrastructure as a foundation for a thriving cultural life. Current interest in documentary theatre and newer forms of audience development are extensions of this trend being based on ideals of equal opportunity, democratic rights and active participation of ordinary citizens.

In the 1980s the terms community theatre, community-based theatre and popular theatre were widely used, the goal being to develop new non-hierarchical collaboration models between professionals and non-professionals. The background and practice of this kind of exploration is discussed in *Kulturpolitikk i praksis* *(Cultural policy in practice)* (Bruun, Eliæson and Wright 1989). The all-encompassing theatre policy brought a blurring of the sharp boundary between art and culture (Aslaksen 2007). This gave rise to new practices that engaged professionals and non-professionals equally. Barbro Rønning, one of the founders of Hedmark Theatre, used Finnish director Ralf Långbacka’s eight theses about the artistic theatre (based on Bertolt Brecht). Långbacka argues that art and culture that cultivate the tastes and views of only one group are both undemocratic and unartistic (Rønning 1994: 54–55). One result in 2017 of this cultural-political priority are the big out-door and often historic events based performances. This popular form of Norwegian theatre, despite being disdained by some elitists, attracts tourists and locals in equal numbers (Spelhandboka 2017). There are otherwise many professional theatre companies and practitioners in Norway who provide theatre for and with innumerable groups, including children of all ages, youth, older citizens, immigrants, minorities, those with learning difficulties and prisoners. There is no doubt that applied theatre thrives in Norway. This however appears to be under-communicated to governmental policy makers and (still) on the margin of official cultural funding and research funding priorities.

It is symptomatic that the path has been circuitous. In the 1990s, new liberal trends reversed the all-encompassing theatre policy. Aslaksen (2007) writes that art and culture again became two different and incompatible fields, resulting in the marginalisation of the more radical interpretations of democratic theatre practice. A systematic shut down of the community-based theatres and a retreat from comprehensive theatre practice led in the 1990s to a becalming of theatre practice that investigated artistic processes in dynamic relationship to life processes and social change. This did not prevent the continued development of the experimental theatres’ artistic activities. State funds, however, went primarily to the public theatres. Today, the term applied theatre has replaced community theatre, community-based and popular theatre. Applied theatre, even so, encompasses a wider field of practice including much of the drama and theatre practices within education and social work.

**Diversity redefined in the new millennium**

Another contextual aspect of the P:UNKT project is the notion of diversity. Originally, diversity meant *artistic* diversity, the focus of diversity being on the independent theatre companies and their relationship to the institutions (Kulturdepartementet 2002: 10). It was not until the governmental documents *Kulturløftet 1* and *2* from 2005-13 that diversity was associated with Norway as multicultural society (Kulturdepartementet 2013). Many projects and local activities were given support in 2008, the Year of Diversity, diversity from this year becoming a buzzword as articulated in the *Diversity Report* from 2011 (Kulturdepartementet 2011). This report marks a dramatic change in the attitude towards citizens, collaboration and diversity no longer building on separation but on inclusion and *cultural* diversity (Kulturdepartementet 2011: 10). This way of thinking connects clearly to the democratic legacy from after the Second World War, updated and redefined for the 21st century.

National guidelines after 2000 appear to support innovative ways of engaging and participating with citizens of all kinds. There was an official shift toward the inclusion and recognition of citizens as an active and participating resource in cultural life, ordinary people living in Norway no longer being seen to be just consumers but also producers of culture. This tendency was intensified in 2014 by a renewed emphasis on diversity and sustainable democratic values (Kulturutredningen 2014). The world however changes rapidly, the world since then and today in 2017 being characterized by major migration challenges and heightened terror threats. All over the world today there is a renewed focus on the arts in many different new settings. Applied theatre practice can play an important role in moulding coherence and meaning when reality is overwhelming. In my view, the P:UNKT project also corroborates the social relevance of theatre arts.

**Atypical amateur theatre**

The P:UNKT project was guided by the vision to ‘reflect the world in Akershus and Akershus in the world’ (Birch 2009: 19). The intention was to ‘contribute to social change and diversity by getting to know foreign Norwegians’ (Birch 2011a: 2). P:UNKT was initiated by Birch after his visit to C:NTACT in Copenhagen, Denmark, which was started in 2004 by artistic director Henrik Hartman at the Betty Nansen Theatre. Here immigrant youths from the Greater Copenhagen area stood on the theatre’s main stage and shared their stories with simple dramatic means under professional artistic direction. The Danish project, which today is a vibrant company (Contact 2017), acted as a role model for P:UNKT, the P:UNKT project being right from the start launched as atypical amateur theatre. Birch describes the project as ‘different from conventional amateur theatre. P:UNKT participants create the scripts themselves. Their thoughts and ideas are the basis for what is presented on stage’ (Birch 2011b). Birch hired professional practitioners with applied theatre competencies who were prepared to work in this way with newly established theatre groups of immigrants and ethnic Norwegians. Theatre groups were set up in Akershus’ four regions with the support of local newspapers and public institutions such as adult education, child welfare services, language schools and arts schools for adolescents. Between 2008 and 2012, eighteen public performances were produced locally in the regions. There were also three larger scale joint performances for all regions. The project consisted of a stable group of around 35 non-professional actors in the two years I followed it, half with immigrant backgrounds and half, born in Norway but not necessarily in Akershus.

**Axis of vulnerability and strength**

A unique aspect of the project was that the theatre groups consisted of both immigrants and ethnic Norwegians. The democratic agenda was explicit in that the perspectives of the majority and minority groups were of equal importance (Birch 2010: 3). The number of different mother tongues and countries of origin of the project members varied. The ensemble was presented in the program for the joint performance in 2010 as consisting of ‘Norwegians from fourteen different countries’ (Birch 2010). A number of the participants had experienced war and lived through dramatic experiences including fleeing to and arriving in Norway. Space was given to these life experiences in the devising process and performances. They were set into relief by other significant life experiences of those born in Norway. Akershus is a suburb of greater Oslo with a population that does not typically have roots in the county that stretch back for generations. Akershus has, in this sense, a young population, one of newcomers to the county not only from abroad but also from other parts of Norway.

An example of the performance format is a scene with two 17yearold boys. One is Kurdish, proud of his origin and longing to return. The other is Norwegian struggling with mathematics at school. They unfold their different challenges and share feelings of loneliness and inadequacy, of frustration and even anger. Both then find hope and meaning in adversity through the relational encounter and experiencing the ability to cope. Another example is the story of an elderly woman, originally from a small village in west Norway. She shares her experience of moving as a young woman to Akershus in eastern Norway where social rules are very different from where she grew up. Her experience of otherness and of being a stranger in her own country is set in relief by newer experiences of feeling alien and insecure in a new environment, performed by actors with non-ethnic Norwegian backgrounds. These examples represent the pervasive theme of the axis of vulnerability and strength in the P:UNKT performances. The style of the performances was physicalized story-telling theatre. The actors used their own name on stage, but often played characters and dramatized feelings, spaces, furniture and objects in others’ scenes. Music, song and dance from all the participants’ places of origin gave the performances colour and enhanced the entertainment value considerably. As a whole, the performances communicated an acknowledgement of adversity and vulnerability in a dynamic interaction with hope and empowerment and depicted an alternative representation of reality which integrated ethnic, religious and cultural differences.

**What is quality in applied theatre?**

The project faced a number of dilemmas. These included whether tickets should be free or not. There was also no precedence for how Akershus Theatre should present the project in its repertoire and on the theatre's web site. Tickets were free in the last few years of the project, primarily to protect the non-professionals from the unrealistic expectations of external spectators. This proved to be valuable, as it also resulted in a larger and more diverse audience attending, mirroring the multicultural ensemble. Coverage was good in the local newspapers, but there were no formal reviews. This reflects conventional press practice for non-professional theatre. All arts practice by non-professionals furthermore presents the challenge of quality. What and who decides whether artistic quality is good or not? Sauter (2008) launches the quality term *eventness*, a definition of quality that is flexible and process orientated and contrasts the non-dynamic, canonised western quality discourse of high and low. This is reflected by French philosopher Jacques Rancière (2012) who recommends the use of the term *the liberated spectator*. Rancière argues that a genuinely open and non-knowing attitude is necessary to be able to perceive and experience the uniqueness of a shared moment such as a theatre performance.

Both these theoretical approaches to quality are useful in this context as they offer alternatives to artistic quality being measured as high (professional) and low (non-professional). A paradox that is, however, well known to all who work with amateurs is that the non-professional actor needs a different pedagogical facilitation than the professional. This, in my experience, means ensuring containment and distance to an equal extent. The lived experience will not work on stage unless it is contained and transformed by some kind of acting and presentation skills. The role of the professional facilitator, dramaturg and director is therefore to make sure that the performance of autobiographical material does not appear private and raw. It needs to communicate what the creator-performer wants to communicate in a way that is dignified and interesting to the audience. The audience, on the other hand, must endure being challenged by unexpected performances and choices that might not be familiar or that they might not have seen before. Therefore social constructivism (Heron and Reason 1997) and Thompson and Schechner’s (2003) view of theatre as social phenomena is based on the understanding that the audience are also participants. Sauter’s (2008) term *eventness* also challenges the notion of performance as a fixed object, conversely being a relational and performative process created by all involved. Quality understood from the relational perspective is hence measured in terms of affect and the shared experience of *communitas* (Sauter 2008).

P:UNKT was well established by the autumn of 2011 when it was decided to invite to performances a group of newly arrived asylum-seekers from the temporary refugee reception centre near one of the venues. I was present at one of these performances. The intensity in the auditorium was palpable. The overall theme of the performed stories was dealing with the discovery of unknown resilience and somehow coming through difficult times. The stories usually ended with the overcoming of adversity and finding celebration. It is important, however, to emphasize that within this was a strong sense of acknowledging feelings of pain and grief for what was lost, be it parent, child, country, language, culture, past or health. The performance showed the struggle for a safe and stable everyday life. The performers all had permanent residency in Norway by birth or application. In the audience were those without this. It seemed that the performance offered hope to the newcomers of what could be possible. At the same time, their experience of waiting and of uncertainty was respected. After the performance, both groups expressed that it had been a powerful experience to be seen and acknowledged by each other in this way.

**THEATRE OF LIFE**

The focus throughout the theatre project was on the non-professional participants. Birch writes in the 2009 project report that ‘P:UNKT is more for participants and their development than for the theatre’s usual audience’ (Birch 2009: 19). My research also centred on the participants, their individual experiences and how these related dynamically to the whole. I also focussed on what kind of meaning making arose in the wake of the project in the wider community and in the region as a whole. The definition of Norwegian national values and identity is not static and is under constant official debate in the media and probably in every home. In my view, these kinds of questions and disputes are mainly coloured by ethnocentrism and hegemonic undercurrents of us and them, old and new, known and unknown, safe and threatening. The main argument of this article is therefore to demonstrate that the PUNKT project challenged this way of thinking and proposed action methods through applied theatre to transcend habitual dichotomies.

**Personal benefit**

According to the participants’ own statements, taking part in the project had a positive effect on their everyday lives and quality of life. Those with immigrant backgrounds felt it important to point out that they not only had learned Norwegian more quickly, but also gained a better understanding of cultural conventions and codes in Norway. A young man who had arrived as an unaccompanied minor said that ‘this project has made it easier for me to get to know others and myself’ (Bruun 2016: Anonymous 3). My research studies also touched upon the significance of being part of a community in which it was possible and encouraged to use autobiographical material to create theatre, which furthermore contributed positively to participants’ everyday lives and to how they experienced their own life situation. A significant aspect from the participants’ perspective was the transfer value of the benefits of taking part in the project onto their daily lives. Making theatre based on one’s own life experiences provided the opportunity for aesthetic reflection and transformation using the whole self - head, body and feelings. This created an exchange and dialogue between the artistic experience and the life experience outside the theatre. A term that grew out of the non-professionals’ voices was *theatre of life*.One of the participants summarised this as follows:

The theatre of life has been a fantastic and developing process. I am so glad that I grasped this opportunity. I hope the project continues. I recommend everyone to take part. It really is something everyone can benefit from. (Bruun 2011: Anonymous 1)

**Significance of the professional production apparatus**

The participants clearly agreed and expressed (without me posing a leading question on this) that their motivation was heavily influenced by the project being hosted and produced by the regional theatre. This apparently gave the project a recognition that should not be underestimated. The project being run by Akershus Theatre and its professional production apparatus gave it status and recognition. This helped balance the social agenda, countering possible stigmatisation of some of the participants as vulnerable, marginalised and social clients. The ability of the creative practice to promote health was also pointed out by most participants, both their own and other participants’. An increase in confidence and spontaneity on stage of those who participated in the project over a number of years could also be observed. Terms such as diversity, democracy and tolerance thus had an experiential and embodied significance to most participants and were continuously and actively in play, also challenging mono-cultural thinking and attitudes. Through the aesthetic distancing of theatre, many saw themselves enabled to process and connect to real life experiences in new ways.

It can be challenging to develop new relationships for those used to being treated as outsiders and without resources. Experiencing and discovering one self and one’s own potential resources requires repetition of new skills and the opportunity to test them out in a safe space and over time. There is now substantial research that supports that the empathy and coping skills of those who take part in drama and theatre processes over a period of time can strengthen. This can contribute to a recovery of self-confidence, self-worth and the restoration of healthy attachment patterns (Aagaard 2013; Bruun 2012; Jennings 2009; Størseth 2013; Thorson 2014). Artistic director Birch and the team of directors all emphasized that this kind of applied theatre requires time and space to grow and mature. It was in particular emphasised in the study from 2016 (three years later) that the duration of the project had been a decisive factor. The duration and the numerous performance processes provided participants with the opportunity to learn a great deal and acquire skills for performance on stage and in life. Duration also gave the opportunity to build real trust and authentic relationships that have continued after the project ended.

**Coming home**

In my formal and informal dialogues with the participants I noticed a repetition of expressions such as ‘like coming home’, ‘to be seen’ and ‘the feeling of belonging’. The professional and non-professional participants agreed that they had shared an experience of doing something significant together as residents of the county of Akerhus. Ritual thinking seems again to be relevant, the everyday and symbolic levels of experience transcending and transforming into something unique in the project community, the values of this charged new meaning being characterized by the notion of inclusion and belonging together. Sauter, referring to Turner, not surprisingly links *communitas* to the sense of identity and liminality (Sauter 2008: 32). This makes sense in a project such as P:UNKT with such porous boundaries between the real and symbolic. The feeling of solidarity and community was characterized by a collective unanimity that this was worth doing and of being in contact with something essential in life of an ethical and existential nature.

The experience of inclusion and integration were uttered equally by the participants with immigrant background and those with ethnic Norwegian backgrounds. A distinct aspect of the project was the intention to treat all participants as equally valuable and important citizens of Norwegian society. The project was not addressed specifically to those with immigrant backgrounds or to the so-called vulnerable, such as unaccompanied refugee minors or the unemployed. Treating ethnic and new Norwegian citizens on equal terms created fertile conditions for a coming together in a new ‘free’, liminal space that gave grounds to transform habitual and ethnocentrism based identity constructions. The strong feeling of solidarity that the project created may be a demonstration of a deeper value system that cherishes human dignity and respect for self and other. This might be seen as representing intersubjective values that in this case found form as representing Norwegian identity and belief systems.

**Toward a new we**

The research shows that the participants understood P:UNKT to be a proactive contribution to society that communicated the idea that Norway is a country made up of strong forces that fight for inclusive and democratic values. However, it should be emphasised that this is not reflected in the real life experiences of those arriving and living in Norway as an immigrant, asylum-seeker or refugee. On the contrary, there were many powerful stories of refugees arriving in Norway and of their uncertainty and anxiety whilst waiting for a residence permit. Contact with Norwegian officialdom was also often unpleasant and undignified. The significant feeling of belonging that the participants in the P:UNKT project created together across cultures, ages and professions was therefore more of a counter-story than a direct representation of reality and lived life in Norway. The many layers of performance in P:UNKT within the community of professionals and non-professionals, of immigrants and ethnic Norwegians, told a story of Norway as a multicultural nation. The performances furthermore opened up the theatre to the inclusion of a new audience segment that represent the present and future multicultural Norway.

Such a *cultural performance* with its hyper-complex *playing culture* springs into the eyes as a kind of future fantasy of Norway. The project was initially based on a conventional approach to us-them, the two groups were seen as old and new Norwegians, insiders and outsiders, majority and minority. Through the six year applied theatre project, this was replaced by another way of thinking in which this kind of opposites are not seen as useful or appropriate. The integration work then does not mean to integrate the minority into the majority, but to create something new together that represents an integrated community. From this, emerge new thinking and ability to imagine new ways of living together and of creating meaning. My point here is that, in this case of applied theatre practice, this was far from sentimentalism, as the project actually happened. The project was demanding, there was a continual negotiation of what was possible and would serve the aims. The emergence of a new we was the result of making a huge effort together, first sharing lived experience within the project community, then making theatre from the shared stories and relating with audiences and the wider community.

**Conclusion**

In my view, the strong bonding and feeling of community across ethnicities and cultural background among the participants of P:UNKT represents a utopian hope of future societal practice in Norway. Although the project did not always progress smoothly, a strong sense of internal loyalty to the project developed among the participants. The fundamental values and intentions of inclusion and respect of each individual’s lived and performed experience seemed to be dominant and most of the time in the foreground. It seems to me that the participants of P:UNKT, professionals and non-professionals, experienced themselves as ambassadors of the values that they themselves practiced, performed and negotiated throughout the project period. This was highlighted after the 22 July 2011 terror attacks in Oslo and on Utøya. The collective shock was immediately integrated into rehearsals and emotionally acknowledged in the performance that fall with short, autobiographical lines that could not be misunderstood in the context: ‘I was walking the dog around the block’. ‘I was visiting a friend and we were drinking tea’. ‘I was on the way to a travel agent in the centre of Oslo to buy an air ticket’.

 With the P:UNKT project Akershus Theatre offered a timely and appropriate way to fulfil its obligation as regional theatre. The theatre strengthened its relationship with the region’s infrastructure whilst the project ran and I believe this to result in long-term benefits such as developing new audience segments and participatory models with the citizens. Akershus Theatre proved its credibility as regional theatre and demonstrated its willingness to experiment and to develop new ways of collaboration. It expanded its network of partners and contributed to positive change within the infrastructure itself, through the huge organisational and artistic effort of producing so many original public performances, involving such a large number of people from all regions of Akershus and with such a diversity of backgrounds. Still, the most important result of the project that might also epitomize the value of applied theatre itself when succeeded was that the project changed people’s thinking and preconceptions of us-them. A new we emerged and alternative imagination of Norwegian life and national identity in the future.

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