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Common ground

A case study of the perceived sense of community in a theatre audience

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ABSTRACT

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As contemporary societies grapple with increasing polarisation and social fragmentation, the search for spaces which can cultivate community has become increasingly relevant. This thesis explores how theatre audiences perceive a sense of community and examines the factors which contribute or limit the emergence of a temporary community within the performance setting. Furthermore, it further considers whether a theatre audience can be understood as a microcosm of society.

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach, focusing on the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* at the University of the Arts Helsinki, Theatre Academy in January 2026. The performance incorporates participatory elements, including a post-performance shared meal. The data consists of semi-structured interviews with audience members, as well as autoethnographic observations from five performances.

The findings suggest that low-threshold, embodied participatory elements can facilitate interaction between strangers and contribute to the emergence of a feeling of a temporary community. Moreover, arranging audience seating in ways that depart from the traditional auditorium layout, for example by positioning audience members to face one another, has a positive effect on enhancing the shared nature of the experience. Sensory elements and post-performance activities also play a significant role in shaping audience interaction. While the social impact may be situational and contribute to increased social contact, its wider societal implications remain limited and inconclusive.

KEYWORDS

Theatre audiences, participatory theatre, sense of community, audience experience, inclusion

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION 4

1.1. Background of the study 5

1.2. Research problem, objective and research question 6

1.3. Structure of the thesis 8

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 9

2.1. Theatre audience and the act of spectatorship 9

2.2. Theatre audience as a social formation 13

2.3. The theatre space 15

2.4. Why theatre? 16

2.5. Social capital as a measurement of community 18

2.5.1. Perceived sense of community as well-being 20

2.5.2. Simultaneous communities 22

2.5.3. The drawback of social capital 22

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHDOS 25

3.1. Research design 25

3.2. Data collection 26

3.2.1. Interviews 26

3.2.2. Literature review 28

3.2.3. Autoethnographic observations 28

3.3. Data analysis 29

3.4. Research limitations and ethical considerations 30

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS 33

4.1. Introduction to project 33

4.2. Theatre as a shared experience 37

4.2.1. Atmosphere 37

4.2.2. Expectations for the role of the audience 38

4.2.3. Participation through action 38

4.2.4. Participatory elements and awareness of others 39

4.2.5. Shared experience 40

4.2.6. Own and audience response 41

4.2.7. Audience size 41

4.2.8. Setting of the space 42

4.3. Spectator to participant 43

4.3.1. Experiencing others before and after the performance 43

4.4. Broader reflections that tie into society 44

4.4.1. The meaning of audience experience *45*
4.4.2. Social implications of the audience experience *46*
4.4.3. Broader reflections on theatre and society *47*
4.5. Autoethnographic observations *48*

5. CONCLUSIONS 50
5.1. Summary of findings *50*
5.2. Implications for practise *52*
5.3. Suggestions for further research *53*

References
Appendices

1. INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a suburban neighbourhood in Sipoo, Finland, where shared responsibilities and collective practices were a part of everyday life. Residents jointly maintained the shared yard, even tasks such as hoisting and lowering the flag were organised collectively through a rotating system. I recall communal cleaning events that often concluded with shared meals, creating interaction and a sense of belonging among neighbours. Over time I began to observe a shift in these practices: participation became more individualised, shared activities diminished and responsibilities were outsourced. This experience led me to reflect on whether such changes indicate a broader transformation in community life.

While my observations are subjective, they resonate with wider discussions on social capital and the changing nature of communal engagement, as highlighted by Robert D. Putnam (2000). Rather than assuming a simple decline in community, I consider whether forms of social interaction have evolved or relocated into different contexts. Possibly contemporary experiences of community are less tied to traditional forms of collective labour and more connected to shared cultural or social experiences.

In this thesis, I explore the extent to which a sense of community can be perceived within a theatre audience. I approach the audience not as passive spectators but as active participants in a shared experience, where curiosity plays a central role in shaping engagement. The idea of “common ground” serves as a conceptual lens through which I examine how individuals relate to a performance, to each other and to the broader social environment of the theatre. Through a case study, I investigate how audience members perceive and articulate their sense of belonging, connection, and shared experience, contributing to broader discussions on audience engagement and the social dimensions of performing arts.

1.1. Background of the study

While the intention is not to frame this thesis from an overly pessimistic perspective, I am impelled to reflect on the multiple crises that contemporary societies are facing. These include environmental degradation, widening economic inequalities, the rise of far-right political movements, and increasing global insecurity shaped by ongoing conflicts. Considering these developments, leads me to questioning how societies can meaningfully respond to such challenges and what forms of collective engagement might support a more resilient future.

The extreme individualism that the values of western capitalism promote have led to an illusion of continuous self-improvement and growth at the cost of community. In urban environments inhabitants live in close proximity to each other, however many end up feeling socially distant (Putnam, 2000). So much so that in Helsinki, where I live, I am lucky if I get a hello back from my neighbour. In my opinion this loss of community is one of the root causes of the problems we are facing.

In the spirit of not losing hope, I am determined to believe that an inevitable systems change can start in every community member. Being a theatre maker turned arts management master's student I have to look to my own community and start there – the theatre. This brings me to the focus of this thesis - how can we nurture a sense of community between audience members partaking in a performance?

Beyond my personal interest and background in theatre, I consider it important to critically examine why the theatre audience provides a relevant context for investigating processes of community formation. What distinguishes the theatre setting as a site where a sense of community may emerge, and how might shared artistic experiences contribute to forms of collective engagement and belonging?

Blank and Jensen wrote in 2005 about the concerns of most blockbuster movies which contain a multitude of computer-generated imagery and how that increases the demand for theatre and intrapersonal relations. Is this statement coming to new light again now as the amount of AI generated imaging is filling the feeds on our phones? Even experienced media consumers are starting to struggle with distinguishing between real and generated

footage. This leads me to consider whether there is a growing desire for forms of theatre that extend beyond passive spectatorship. I ask whether audiences increasingly seek immersive experiences that allow for deeper engagement and the possibility of forming meaningful connections with both the performance and other audience members.

This study investigates the audience of the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* by director Gua Khee Chong. It is the artistic thesis piece of their directing master's studies at the Helsinki University of Arts, Theatre Academy. I was originally approached by Chong, who is a student at the same university, on the possibility of handling production related tasks, as well as stage management of the production. At this point I was looking for a subject for my study and was considering interviewing audience members attending a discussion event for a play at a big theatre in Helsinki. Since I was interested in the immediate response of the audience, the opportunity for interviewing audience members was limited to one time at the discussion event. The format of the performance at the bigger theatre was a traditional stage and audience divide, and I was leaning towards looking into the effects of a more experimental artistic approach. I knew that Chong was looking to create a more immersive experience for the audience and as I was to be involved in the production, I decided on interviewing audience members attending the five performances of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* at the Theatre Academy.

1.2. Research problem, objective and research question

There is abundant research about community theatre and the well-being aspects of that (Westhoff, 2020). From personal experience, having been a part of many theatre ensembles – amateur and professional, this is somewhat obvious. Research suggests that cultural group activities, such as choir singing, can enhance well-being through the development of a sense of community; theatre may offer comparable effects (Hyyppä, 2013). The interest of this research lies in more of a societal lens, hence the theatre audience as a research subject. As most often, the audience members do not share any type of connection, other than an interest to see the performance. This is why they are an

interesting group to investigate. Can they be examined as a microsample of society, and what conclusions can be drawn from talking to audience members?

Talking about the perceived sense of community in a theatre audience or talking about community theatre are two completely different things. Here is where the existing research gap is. Community theatre is something that is produced by a community for a community, often volunteer based (Westhoff, 2020). Individuals from varying backgrounds join from a love of art, but also for the journey towards the result. As Rancière (2021) defines theatre to be communitarian, creating for the fun of it certainly embodies that aspect. My own experience confirms this idea as well.

As I landed on the theatre audience as a subject of my study, I found that there is limited research that addresses the theatre audience directly. Scholars have a tendency to mystify audience response, making it their own task to make blanket statements based on their interpretations (Freshwater, 2009). Freshwater (2009) maintains that media audience is surprisingly a far more studied group, considering how central the audience is to theatre. Looking into research that explores especially the feeling of community in a theatre audience, Hayes's (2006) study of UK audiences is the only one I was able to locate. I was particularly interested in the sociological lens, since the concepts of social capital by Bourdieu (1986) and Putnam (2000) were of central interest for me.

Against this background, the aim of this research is to examine how a sense of community is perceived and experienced within a theatre audience, and to explore the role of shared cultural experience in shaping these perceptions. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do audience members perceive and describe their sense of community within a theatre setting?
- What factors contribute to or limit the emergence of a sense of community among audience members?
- In what ways can a theatre audience be understood as a microcosm of broader social relations?

1.3. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured in five main chapters:

Chapter 1 introduces the background of the study and gives a brief introduction of the case study along with the motivations for the choice of case. It expands on the research questions and aim of the study.

Chapter 2 expands the theoretical framework, combining themes of the historically evolving role of the audience and the effect of the theatre space. It includes perspectives of social capital theory, well-being and the theatre audience as a social formation.

Chapter 3 details the research methodology, which is a qualitative case study. It also includes research design, data collection methods and methods of analysis. The chapter concludes with the acknowledgement of research limitations as well as ethical considerations of the research process.

Chapter 4 reviews the main findings of the interviews as well as relates the findings through analysis to the theoretical framework. It details the audience experience of the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* for context.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with a summary of findings from the case study. It gives some suggestions of implications for practise as well as suggestions for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the theory of this study in which the theatre audience is being researched through the lens of participation, sense of community and well-being. Rather than looking at the event of theatregoing as an individual aesthetic experience, the research frames audience engagement as a socially situated event, where individuals previously unknown to each other are sharing an experience of shared cognitive meaning-making. Starting off with a brief historical overview on how the theatre audience has been positioned in different times in the western theatre tradition.

In the chapter I also give an overview of why the theatre audience can be viewed as a social formation and how the theatre space can aid in providing an encouraging environment that cultivates community. Furthermore, the motivations as to why the study of community is being done in the context of theatre are expanded upon. Towards the end I explore how the theory of social capital can be instructive when researching community and how well-being can increase from having strong community ties. Finally, I explore the simultaneous communities an audience member can be a part of as well as get into the more negative sides of social capital.

2.1. Theatre audience and the act of spectatorship

“The nineteenth century was a century of actors. The twentieth century was a century of directors. The twenty-first century is a century of spectators.” (Burzyńska, 2016: 6)

This phrase from *Joined Forces: Audience Participation in Theatre* effectively captures a historical shift within the theatre field. Artists increasingly engage with socio-political issues, while scholars foreground both the performative dimensions of political life and the political dimensions of theatrical performance (Burzyńska, 2016). Examining historical shifts in audience positioning helps contextualise contemporary audience perceptions. At the core of this discussion lies the historically established division between stage and auditorium.

How active an audience is, depends on the artistic vision of the creator. I am simplifying this by naming one side spectator, which means viewing the individual audience member as a receiver of content, as the definition of the verb *spectate* in essence means to watch. The other end of the spectrum would be co-creator, which implies a more collaborative role of the audience. Here they are named a creator implying that their role is integral to the existence of the piece at hand. In between these two, one can find varying amounts of activity within participation and interpretation, as the spectator to co-creator sliding scale encompasses a range of theoreticians. For example, within the field of participatory theatre, there are streams like theatre of the oppressed, conceived or collected by the Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal. Under the Theatre of the Oppressed umbrella is Forum theatre, which is a form of political theatre where the audience becomes the actor, or through Boal's phrase: a spect-actor, whose task is to jump into the role of the one suffering from an oppression or injustice and try to create resistance in a scene (Boal, 2002). However, changing the view of the audience doesn't necessarily mean that members of the audience need to be participating in the drama.

A history of theatre audiences implies a clear change in audience status, as audiences of Greek theatre enjoyed a direct relationship to performers as well as a connection with the society in which it was framed (Bennett, 1997). This relationship was supported by the open architecture of the amphitheatres, which barely separated the audience from the performers. In terms of medieval English theatres audiences, who were not quite as powerful as their Greek counterparts, however, they did have an active role as the relationship between stage and audience was rather flexible (Bennett, 1997). With the establishing of private theatres in the seventeenth century came a more rigid separation of stage and audience. With higher admissions prices which restricted audience diversity, the passivity of the codes of conducts of the elites started to shape the norms as the audiences became more bourgeois (Bennett, 1997).

In 1913 the futurist F.T. Marinetti printed their "Variety theatre manifesto" as a provocation towards the quiet reflective audience. The manifesto included suggestions to physically engage the audience by placing itching powder or glue in seats and selling the same ticket twice as to provoke fights between audience members (Marinetti, 1913). The tone is humorous, but behind it reads a real attempt at breaking the fourth wall and

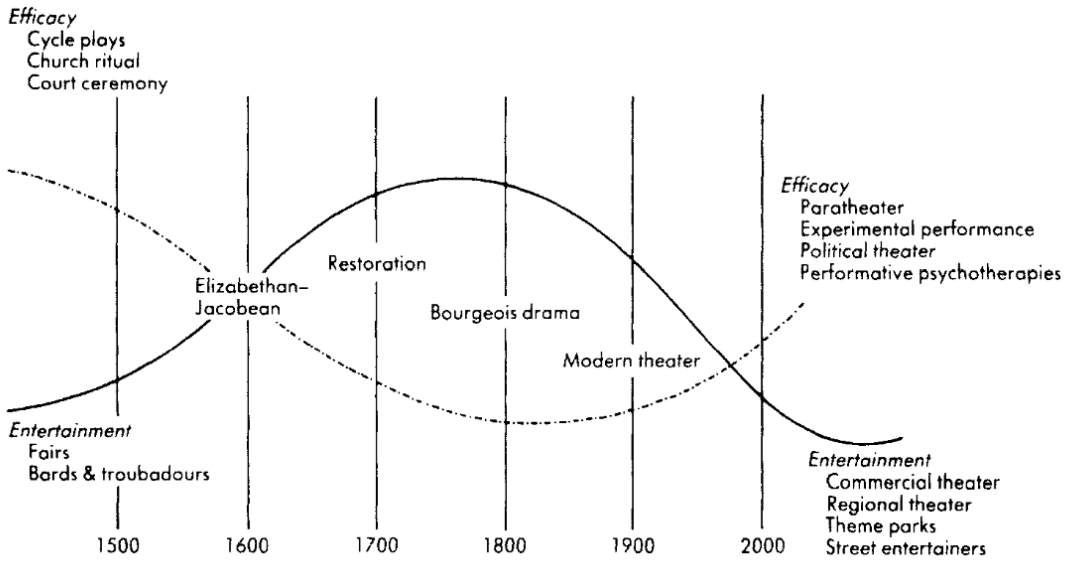
shaking up the passivity of the spectators. Marinetti was also controversially a proclaimed left-wing fascist who supported the rise of the party that helped Mussolini to power in Italy. Since then, there have been attempts at challenging and disrupting the conventions of passivity, to the point of the emergence of the phrase "the emancipated spectator" (Bennett, 1997; Rancière, 2021). Since the civil rights movement of the sixties, many new theatres that centre traditionally marginalised groups, have purposefully pursued the centrality of the spectator as a subject who can think and act (Bennett, 1997).

Meyerhold (1969) went as far as to say, any production they produced would still be unfinished as it appears on stage, since it is completed by the interpretation of the audience. This leads us to the formulated "paradox of the spectator" by Rancière (2021: 2) where "there is no theatre without a spectator". But as the critics put it, being a spectator is a bad thing because "viewing is the opposite of knowing" and spectating is "the opposite of acting" (Rancière, 2021:2). As one spectates, one is estranged from the knowledge and the power to act. This offers a view into why contemporary theatre is actively considering the role of the audience. Abiding by Rancière's (2021) categorisation the scale of spectator to co-creator is instructive. As Plato claimed the theatre to be an absolutely bad thing, a place where ignoramuses go to see people suffering. The view of theatre by Plato, was a scene of illusion and passivity which must be shut down from standing in the way of knowledge and action. Drama comes from the ancient Greek word for action and Rancière (2021:3) coined that "theatre is a place where action is taken by bodies in motion in front of bodies that need to be mobilised". Theatre theorists such as Brecht and Artaud held differing views on the devices that should be used to mobilise the audience in the mid-twentieth century. In Brecht's epic theatre, the audience must be allowed some distance and theatrical mediation be used as a tool for understanding the social situation, and thus invoke the need for action (Brecht, 1964/2015). Whereas Artaud's theatre of cruelty manifesto calls for a total foregoing of the audience's position as spectator, surrounding them in the drama and thus restoring their collective energy (Artaud, 1964/2010).

Performance theory offers a useful framework for reconsidering the role of the spectator, as it understands theatre as an event shaped by the interaction between performers and audiences (Schechner, 1988). As illustrated in Figure 1 below, the wave motion of

efficacy (ritual) and entertainment in performance goes up and down as a reflection of societal changes (Schechner, 1988). When efficacy is stronger performances are ritualistic and allegorical, while the entertainment strand comes with individuality and class-orientation (Schechner, 1988). Schechner (1988) claims that theatre flourishes when both strands are equally present, when entertainment and ritual are both represented. The rising and falling motion is not a statement of value, but merely an approximation of western theatre trends.

Figure 1 *Development of Efficacy and Entertainment through Theatre History*



Note: from *Performance theory* (p.122) by Richard Schechner, 1988, Routledge, Copyright 1988 by publisher

The effort of streamlining the prevailing cultural trends in theatre is a tall order. However, some scholars agree that the 21st century theatre brings about the redefinition of the relationship between performers and audiences, as contemporary theatre is leaning towards viewing the audience as a participant (Gardner, 2007; Heim 2016). Gardner stated in 2007 that programmers are not keeping up with the audience's demand for more intimacy in live art, as well as stating a strong belief in the effects of participation in performance allowing the audience ownership of their lives. A healthy criticism can be offered towards such blanket statements of scholarly writing, often without substantiation of their claims by consulting the target group in question, that is the audience (Freshwater, 2009).

These historical shifts illustrate how the understanding of the role of the audience has shifted between active and passive, shaping contemporary discussions of audience agency in theatre. This suggests that the emancipation of the spectators does not necessarily imply that spectating is a passive state that needs to be turned into activity (Rancière, 2021). Spectating is something that comes naturally, it can also teach us a lot. Briefly looking at how spectatorship has changed through history, it becomes clear that power structures of society will be present in the theatre as well. Going forwards one central thread is present: to treat the audience like they are up for a challenge and they will step up, or at least that the right audience will find it (Etchells, 2007). I'll conclude this segment with a quote from the same author that I ushered it in with:

"Art becomes much more powerful when performers and spectators join forces" (Burzyńska, 2016:7)

2.2. Theatre audience as a social formation

As the audience enters the performance space, they first sit down with a room full of people that don't necessarily have any type of affiliation to each other. They have agreed to share an experience with the people in the room fuelled by a common interest in the performance. Motivations for going to the theatre might vary, for some the collective nature of the event might play an important part (Ostrower, 2008). However, as the ancient word of theatre (Ancient Greek: *théatron* = a place of seeing) seems to be at odds with the origin of the word audience (Latin: *audire* = to hear) in regards to what senses the audience is using, it might give us some insight into a historical shift of understanding the audience (Freshwater, 2009).

Regardless of how you view your audience, it is safe to say that the theatrical event is inherently relational – who you go with, meeting the ushers, who you're seated next to, as well as momentarily with the performers (Heim, 2016). The reason so many people choose to go in company; is, plainly put, to have someone to reflect on the experience with (Heim, 2016). As theatre arguably is an event which requires the physical presence of the audience to exist; Bennett (1997), however, takes it a step further and states that the audience is in fact integral for theatre to affirm its cultural status. Rancière (2021) on

the other hand, subscribes to the notion that theatre, in essence, is communitarian and in building community, the exchange of ideas is vital. The communication that might spontaneously happen as one is exiting the theatre room, is central in forming community and equally important is recognising boundaries in doing so (Hayes, 2006; Heim, 2016).

Research shows that when the house is at capacity, this will give the individuals in the audience the confidence to respond during the performance (Bennett, 1997). The effect of having the cover of a crowd will make you less self-conscious. Through shared emotional expression and the choreographed motion of the applause, the audience then starts to form into a community (Heim, 2016). Albeit, semiotic analysis determines that communication between audience members might determine a homogeneity of response (Elam, 2002). The human is a social creature after all and a surrendering of oneself to the mass, might not always result in most freedom, even though Heim (2016:122) states that "communitas is synonymous with spontaneity and free will". Inquiry shows that audience response is a valid measurement of the mechanisms of community, as the individuals in the audience often frame their own feelings of involvement through it (Hayes, 2006:28). The response signifies shared meanings amongst the audience, as well as among performers and audience (Hayes, 2006).

A sense of togetherness in theatre does not necessarily depend on direct communication between audience members. In fact, many audience members prefer a silent togetherness. Rancière (2021) draws on the term "apart we are together" from a prose poem by Mallarmé, *The White Water Lily*. The essence of being together apart is sitting in proximity and sharing similar thoughts, as the mutuality of the social situation is enough. The phenomenon is called shared cognitive meaning making, where the meaning making arises from a sort of cognitive co-creation (Heim, 2016). Sometime between when the lights in the room go down and go back up, the audience becomes a collective. Present is a very a human tendency of surrendering oneself to the group for the duration of the performance (Elam, 2002). After all, shared experiences provide common ground for strangers, even if it's just a temporary community (Etchells, 2007).

2.3. The theatre space

The audience is arguably rather used to the scenography changing from performance to performance, but less attention is perhaps focused on the actual theatre space. The setup of the space, the architecture and the house capacity are not neutral factors when it comes to the audience experience. Even more so as we are viewing the space as an accommodating factor for enabling a feeling of community. In the 21st century, so called "third places" and spaces that cultivate community have become increasingly scarce. Theatre houses have the potential of catering to some of that need (Heim, 2016).

In many theatre houses, the first thing one encounters when stepping into the building, is the foyer. They are almost a given to exist in the theatre house, and a necessity in colder climates, but foyers aren't something that have always existed. From the beginning of the 19th century foyers were an important place for the bourgeois to be seen in (Bennett, 1997). Because first impressions will set the tone for the visit, the foyer can be more than a place for socialites and more welcoming to different kinds of visitors. Different settings will either encourage or discourage participation in arts context (Radbourne, 2013).

Upon entering the theatre, the next step is the allocation of seating. Numbered seating brings about a relaxed feeling, one might enjoy a glass of wine before the performance or freshen up in the bathrooms, since there is no rush to secure a good visibility or the possibility to sit with one's entourage. When, to lift an example from the Finnish context, in the Helsinki based theatre "Viirus" where there is free seating, a line will form at the door already a good 20 minutes before the start of the performance. While this may be considered a communal experience, it also introduces the ever so slight feeling of competition for the "good seats". In comparison, the numbered seat might grant a more relaxed experience with the consequence of only sticking to talking to one's own company. The result will emphasise personal with relative immunity from social or physical contact with others (Elam, 2002). In contrast to the queuing situation, where the limited space may encourage interaction with fellow audience members, while they may simultaneously perceive one another as competitors for the best seats. How the seating is arranged can encourage interaction if you have to negotiate space on a bench compared to sitting in your personal armchair (Heim, 2016).

When theatres replaced standing areas with fixed seating in the mid-19th century, the architectural design itself encouraged audiences to behave more calmly and passively (Bennett, 1997). Scholars offer some insight into the formation of the audience space, for example Heim (2016) claims that a round stage shape might make you feel more immersed in the action than a traditional proscenium arch, whereas Heyes (2006) argues that as the audience spreads on different sides of the stage it may heighten spectators' awareness of one another and of the event as a shared experience. Both viewpoints share a layout in which the audience seating is arranged in a wide angle. According to the empirical research of Heim (2016) audience seating where the first row is on the same level as the stage is perceived to increase the involvement in the performance, however, according to the view of Kirby & Kirby (1986) this alone will not make the spectator more active. Many of the traditional theatre houses maintain a fixed seating layout, where the seats furthest away will be the cheapest. The distance from the action and thus to the level of involvement has some evident social implications that extends the historically elitist effect of the foyer (Bennett, 1997). Taking this into consideration, the democratic aspect of free seating becomes apparent.

The visual experience of the theatre is also a key factor. In contrast to the black box setting of contemporary theatres, a warm environment might actually help produce an environment that encourages community (Heim, 2016). As footlights were installed in private theatres in the seventeenth century, they became a very clear barrier to separate the audience from the stage (Bennett, 1997). As to pertain a certain sense of awareness of the other audience members, keeping the houselights on in an audience that has been trained to sit in the darkness, might prove challenging (Heim, 2016). The dimmed lighting contributes to a mood that provides a sort of cover for the individuals in the audience. In the theatre room, you might want to lose yourself to the story and feel as if the outside world is virtually absent (Etchells, 2007).

2.4. Why theatre?

Theatre has long been understood by scholars and artists alike, as more than a place to engage with art. The liveness of the art simultaneously as the co-presence of audience and actors, are all factors that makes it a unique art form. Theatre is a social event where

meaning emerges through the collective experience. This makes it a fruitful artform to use as a ground to investigate community and the arising implications for well-being.

According to Hayes's (2006:65) research on issues about community in theatre audience, there are three key areas:

1. Theatre as an arena for debate
2. The active role of the audience
3. The theatre building

These include issues that will be focused on throughout this thesis. The theatre going experience extends beyond the length of the performance, perhaps even encompassing the journeys each individual takes to and from the event (Gallagher et al., 2021).

In their essay, Blank & Jensen (2005) reflect on their experience putting up a documentary performance, they state how the audience crave a communal experience and stories that ask real questions. Performances that activate their audiences are significant in the community forming aspect (Hayes, 2006). Regardless of the performance being interactive or not, present is still the possibility for communication. One might easily distinguish the difference between watching a film at home or in the cinema, where one is a limited social setting and the other is communal. How does seeing theatre differ from the cinema? According to Rancière (2021) it is the mere presupposition that theatre is communitarian. Granted, the cinema and theatre are both storytelling avenues, however they differ in the liveness. In the research by Hayes (2006) audience members have remarked on the active involvement in theatre compared to a more passive mediated performance of television. In the active role lies a mirror for greater society.

It is not an idealistic claim to argue that theatre has the potential to influence social change through its community (Hayes, 2006). In a very simplified manner, the theatre reminds the audience of the rules of social coexistence, Esslin (1985) concludes the phrase by stating that all drama therefore is a political event. For a long time the theatre practitioners amongst the likes of Brecht as well as the futurists agreed that the most powerful weapon of political theatre was offending the audience (Burzyńska, 2016). As well as in theatre of the oppressed, Boal (2002) clearly states that the audience should exit the performance with a feeling of frustration as to motivate working towards change. In that sense, theatre

has potential to step up as a “rehearsal space” for democracy, where one is motivated to be active and critical (Burzyńska, 2016:6).

As it boils down to why, the answer is because in the theatre people meet people. In the meeting frictions might arise that give way to new understanding. Stories that are told shape our understanding of the world as we cannot escape positioning ourselves in whatever moral dilemmas might be portrayed.

2.5. Social capital as a measurement of community

When investigating the perceived sense of community, one might easily lean on individual narratives. Community in this study refers to a sense of connection and shared belonging that may emerge among individuals through a shared experience, even when they do not know each other beforehand. Looking into sociology, there are some applicable theories to adapt. This chapter will explore the theory of social capital as through the lens of Bourdieu (1986) and Putnam (2000). Both are investigating the workings of societies, which is relevant in this research viewing the theatre audience as a microcosm of greater society. The section will dive into if the event of theatregoing does anything to add to the social capital of the individuals visiting a theatre.

As per the definition of Bourdieu (1986), social capital is defined as the potential quantifiable resources you can mobilise through the networks you possess. The origin of Bourdieu’s research is in investigating what assets, or capital, a person has at hand to get ahead in society. The different forms of capital that Bourdieu (1986) identifies are: economic, cultural and social. Economic capital is perhaps the most traditionally understood notion of capital, i.e. the amount of money or assets directly convertible to money you have. Cultural capital is the knowledge you have acquired, your education and cultural competencies. Social capital is about how big your networks are, your education and what groups you belong to. Bourdieu (1986) is most interested in the power the different forms of capital bring, his writings are, after all, about understanding how societies function. The different forms of capital are rather closely tied to class, as different capitals multiply, one sits on more power (Bourdieu, 1986). Sure enough, those that are in possession of great cultural capital will potentially define theatregoing as a

worthy pastime. The next barrier are the ticket prices, those that hold economic capital will be able to afford buying the pricey tickets. All that's left is being well connected with the theatre crowd, since access to social capital is often determined by group norms, leading theatre to be considered an elite activity (Bourdieu, 1986). As theatres are grappling with filling the seats, their interests lie in audience engagement to diversify and broaden the audience, not in gatekeeping the art from the poor.

Putnam (2000) puts their own spin on social capital in their research on why loneliness is on the rise and community is declining alongside democratic activity in America. The definition for social capital in Putnam's (2000) text deviates from Bourdieu (1986) in the sense that it emphasises norms of reciprocity and the resulting trustworthiness, not so much the individual power. The focus is more on the common good, seeing that the benefits of a well-connected individual in a well-connected society far outweigh the benefits of a well-connected individual in a poorly connected society, in the grand scheme of things (Putnam, 2000). Let it be mentioned that Putnam names the "golden age" of communities in America to be the 60s and surely if you were a straight white married man, it probably was peak living. However, if you were to be part of any marginalised group, this great community spirit did not include, nor welcome you. Putnam (2000) is also not oblivious to this notion. Mentioned here are two different kinds of social capital: bridging and bonding (Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital is with likeminded people and bridging is with others. These categories are neither definite nor good or bad, however, in Putnam's (2000) effort to rebuild community and lessen polarisation, more bridging social capital is needed. This is built on the notion that the most durable networks are often institutionalised, as in family connections and school friends (Bourdieu, 1986).

As we are viewing the theatre audience as a sample of society, research shows that frequent attendees of arts events tend to simultaneously be joiners of civic and social activities (Ostrower, 2008). Therefore, in the humble effort of making the world a better place, there is some evidence to back up that attending the theatre is beneficial for greater society. Be it noted that one should not oversimplify the fact of the matter by confusing correlation with causality. Nevertheless, policymakers ought to be focusing on endorsing community based initiatives and encouraging civic engagement (Putnam, 2000).

Rebuilding social capital is both a private and public matter, therefore an excellent task for an arts organisation.

The way one perceives community is embedded in personal values. Regardless, the social capital theory holds up in mapping the factors that shed light on the reasons for attending the theatre. As to an effort in increasing social capital for the audience members, facilitation in bridging activities is integral. Understanding that the people that already attend the theatre tend to be more active in other areas of civic life, it might prove to be fertile ground for experimentation.

2.5.1. Perceived sense of community as well-being

I argue that meaningful engagement with broader societal challenges is often reliant upon individuals' well-being. When individuals are experiencing personal difficulties or instability, their emotional and cognitive capacity to engage with collective or societal issues is likely to be limited. In this sense, efforts aimed at addressing large-scale societal concerns may be less effective, if the conditions that support individual well-being are not first acknowledged and supported.

This makes the role of community particularly important, as research shows that belonging to a community has the beneficial effects of well-being and longevity (Hyyppä, 2013).

I recognise that well-being is shaped by a range of factors. While genetic predispositions are often considered remarkably, they do not solely determine individual well-being. Social, environmental, and experiential factors also play a significant role in shaping how well-being is experienced and sustained. Culture is one factor that contributes to the conditions that shape epigenetic processes, that is, how external factors influence gene expression (Hyyppä, 2013). When comparing life-expectancy in the world, Okinawa in Japan is in the top tier. While research shows their diets to be healthy, exceptional is the community they maintain (Hyyppä, 2013). In Finland there is a comparable population in the Swedish speaking Finn minority, where social capital is higher and culture is more community leaning thus leading to positive results on well-being.

I acknowledge that well-being extends beyond the mere length of life; however, life expectancy remains a relatively concrete and measurable indicator that is often used to assess broader patterns of well-being. Concerning the subject of this thesis, the interest lies in the community that art experiences can provide. As Freshwater (2009) states, theatre scholars having had made hefty claims of the impact of theatre, oftentimes confuse individual and group response. Looking at life-expectancy provides a somewhat objective ground. There is not necessarily a proven direct correlation of art enjoyment and life expectancy, but the cultural impact that has been visible in survival studies, has a connection to social capital (Hyyppä, 2013). Technically, the benefits of frequenting a theatre are about social connections and being connected to the community, which then in turn plays a part in the well-being of the individual. In the grand scheme of things, theatre going can be an important measure of what culture affords its participants (Bennett, 1997). The agency that audience participation comes with has a link to political empowerment. At the very least, I argue that our expectations regarding the relationship between theatre and its audience can offer valuable insights into broader models of social interaction, including how power relations are experienced and negotiated within society (Freshwater, 2009). From this perspective, the practice of active citizenship may, in part, emerge through engagement with theatre. As Freshwater (2009) emphasises, there is a need for a deeper and more grounded understanding of theatre audiences, one that moves beyond abstract theorisation of audience response and instead engages directly with the perspectives of audience members themselves.

As the focus lies on what art institutions can do to improve well-being for its audience, efforts in creating the conditions for community formation might prove beneficial. In the context of theatre, I suggest that recognising audience members as individuals with agency may have significant implications for participation and civic engagement. Viewing audiences not as passive recipients, but as active contributors to the cultural experience, can potentially promote deeper forms of involvement and strengthen connections between artistic engagement and broader social participation.

2.5.2. Simultaneous communities

As the theatre fills with individuals who share an interest in the art form, I understand the audience not as a single, homogeneous entity, but as a coexistence of multiple, overlapping communities. Regardless of the aim of one's theatre visit; social or purely based in an interest for the performance at hand, community is ever-present.

I have previously stated about the act of shared cognitive meaning making as a vessel of a temporary community formation in the audience for the duration of the performance (Heim, 2016). Hayes (2006) suggests that a theatregoer can feel part of a multiplicity of communities at the performance, outside it and imagined. The concept of imagined communities is characterised by Anderson (1983) and has its roots in nationalism, for example people feel part of a nation even if you have not met every single person in it. In the theatre, you may feel part of the audience and be a part of the imagined audience community without having had a conversation with the other members. Turner (1974) coined the phrase community of feeling, in their exploration of ritual and communitas that arises in liminality. Liminality in this case refers to a sort of in-between space where a person is not immediately connected to everyday life, not unlike when people are stuck in a room watching a performance. Schechner (1988) explores anthropology in performance theory and brings up the writings of Turner (1974) in this context. Theatre is a form of art which requires presence, Rancière (2021) calls it an aesthetic community or a community of sense. The audience is participating communally with their senses.

I acknowledge that multiple communities may coexist simultaneously within the theatre audience. However, this plurality does not diminish the shared experience of the audience; rather, it coexists with the moment in which individuals come together and temporarily form a collective through their shared engagement with the performance.

2.5.3. The drawback of social capital

In chapter 2.5 I explore how social capital can assist in shedding light on the theatre audience and who attends the theatre. However, using social capital as a metric comes with its own baggage. Putnam (2000) focuses on the period before the 1960s in the United States, when civic activity was at an all-time high. Yet the civil liberation that

accompanied the sixties was also followed by a decline in social capital. How is it that, as rights expanded, the sense of community so vital to people's well-being appeared to weaken?

When reflecting on the "golden days" of joining, one might easily fall into the trap of nostalgia. Was it a better time, or was it only better for those that fit the norm? The so called "dark side of social capital" is imposed conformity, where belonging is limited to those that conform to societal norms (Putnam, 200:381). It is to no surprise that the decline in group joining or in other words, the decline in social capital in the US happened in the 60s. This was a time of rising tolerance and diversity, seemingly at the cost of community (Putnam, 2000).

Looking at the theatre audience as a microcosm of greater society, Putnam's (2000:386) contextualisation of societies become relevant. In Figure 2 below "Social Capital and Tolerance: Four Types of Society", society is divided into four categories based on low or high social capital and low or high tolerance. In option (1) where social capital is low and tolerance is high; society is highly individualistic. Freedom is ever-present, but connections are not in a major role. In option (2) with low social capital and low tolerance, present is a looming conflict. Conformity is imposed, but what that entails, differs from person to person, which then in turn will lead to multiple disagreements. Moving up in social capital to option (3) where tolerance is high as well, would according to my standards be an ideal society. Connections are in a key role, as tolerance for difference is simultaneously present. Which means that bridging activities have been successful. Whether that seems realistic is another side completely, for me it seems like for this to succeed, the conflicts mustn't be of the existential sort to begin with. Then in the final and fourth (4) option with high social capital and low tolerance present is a strong in-group vs. out-group mentality. This is perhaps most similar to US society pre-1960s that Putnam (2000) describes.

Figure 2 *Social Capital and Tolerance: Four Types of Society*

	Low Social Capital	*High Social Capital*
High tolerance	(1) *Individualistic:* You do your thing, and I'll do mine	(3) *Civic community* (Salem without "witches")
Low tolerance	(2) *Anarchic:* War of all against all	(4) *Sectarian community* (in-group vs. out-group; Salem with "witches")

Note: from *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (p.386) by Robert D. Putnam, 2000, Simon & Schuster, Copyright 2000 by publisher

Why is Figure 2 "Social Capital and Tolerance: Four Types of Society" and Putnam's (2000) categorisations relevant for a study of contemporary theatre audiences? As tastes for the cultural practise differ, so does the opinion of the tastes of others (Hayes, 2006). People might feel distaste for certain cultural content, for example some might not want to visit the theatre because it might feel too highbrow for their liking. However, Hayes (2006) states that people might feel excluded from groups which they don't believe they have access to. With this in mind, how much of the people visiting the theatre would be more inclined to revisit if efforts in increasing the feeling of belonging would be made?

I recognise that framing an increase in social capital as inherently positive risks oversimplification. While social capital can increase trust and cohesion, it may also reinforce boundaries between groups, as individuals tend to gravitate towards those with whom they share similarities. This dynamic can contribute to in-group and out-group distinctions, potentially limiting inclusivity. Therefore, I consider it important to examine different social models in which varying levels of social capital and tolerance coexist. Such an approach can provide valuable insights into how more inclusive and welcoming environments may be created, particularly within the theatre context, hence encouraging broader participation and repeat engagement among audiences.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHDOS

In this thesis, I adopt a qualitative case study approach to examine how audience members experience a sense of community within a participatory theatre context. The study focuses on the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0*, which incorporates a post-performance shared meal as a part of the audience experience. This setting provides a relevant context for exploring how encounters may contribute to the emergence of collective belonging.

Drawing on the concepts of social capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and Robert D. Putnam (2000), I explore how participatory theatre practices may nurture feelings of collective belonging and civic agency among audience members. The study is grounded in a sociological perspective that considers the audience not as passive spectators, but as active participants within a temporary social formation.

The empirical data for this research is collected through multiple qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews conducted immediately after the performance, autoethnographic observation and a review of relevant literature. This combination of methods allows for a nuanced understanding of both individual experiences and some of the social dynamics at play within the audience.

3.1. Research design

The design of this research is a qualitative case study. Case study is an apt approach when investigating the “why” or “how” in a contemporary phenomenon that’s dependent on real life context (Yin, 2003). In this case, the interviewees are one audience member per performance of the five-show run of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0*.

The research I have conducted has been done with an inductive research methodology, where theories arise from the data. However, the start of the process included an extended review of literature by scholars in theatre as well as sociology. Having been an active member of the production process of the performance, working as a producer and stage manager, allowed me to immerse myself into the subject. Being a part of preparations and

rehearsals gave unique insight into the coming performance. This allowed me to start reflecting on the format for the interviews at an early point. It was also integral to the process to have research related conversations with Chong, the director, on how to set up the interviews as not to infringe upon the artistic aim. This concretely meant leaving the interviewees to enjoy their time in the post-performance meal as long as they liked, before removing them for the interview.

The performances were set to be in the end of January 2026, which meant that the autumn of 2025, was dedicated to reviewing literature. Hayes's (2006) research "Building community: a sociology of theatre audiences" was the closest I got when looking for previous research on similar topics. Their research focused on a couple different theatres with more conventional stage and audience setting performances. I was able to go through Hayes's (2006) interview questions and earmark those that might be relevant for my thesis. Other questions arose likewise whilst reading the work of other scholars, either directly or indirectly tied to the subject.

3.2. Data collection

For this study a few methods of data collection were employed: interviews, autoethnographic observation and literature review. In qualitative research, the personal histories of the interviewees might serve best in answering the researcher's questions (Saldana, 2011). The process of data collection where the task is to take note of peoples varying experiences requires fundamental interpretation from the researcher (Sedgman, 2019). Hence, participant observations are employed to provide nuance. To structure the findings, a literature review lies as the backbone of the theoretical framework. The following subchapters explore the data collection process in more detail.

3.2.1. Interviews

For this study, five audience members that attended *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* were interviewed. Determining who to interview is of major importance, hence the task of choosing appropriate people that are likely to contribute with substantive answers

(Saldana, 2011). The participants selected for the interviews represented expected sources of insight and exploratory cases.

Very early in the process I determined that catching the immediate response of the audience is integral to the aim of this study. I was interested in "bottling" the feeling the audience is leaving with. By the suggestion of my thesis supervisor, I agreed that the smart thing to do is not to leave finding an interviewee to chance, at the event. This is why I chose to sample a combination of a somewhat strategic but mostly serendipitous selection of interviewees, which according to Saldana (2011) is about making do with the researcher's limited time and energy. My selection was strategic, in the sense that I chose some interviewees based on my knowledge about them being analytical and somewhat talkative. Saldana (2011) warns about interviewing close friends, since they might filter sensitive information based on your closeness to them or other people. However, the subject of this study is surely personal, but not private, I thus determined it not an issue that I was familiar with some of the interviewees. The serendipity aspect arose from asking friends to bring someone I wasn't very familiar with, with them for the interview. This created a nice balance between playing it safe and venturing out into the unknown.

I was in contact directly with the interviewees I was familiar with beforehand helping to provide them with a ticket. Some were brought by friends of mine, who took care of the practical arrangements of getting a ticket. One of the agreed interviewees fell ill before, but the person they were coming with was able to get someone else to join both the performance and the interview. When they arrived at the Theatre Academy, I greeted them and let them know that they are to seek me out in the room when they are finished with their meal and ready to leave. The interview took place in a separate room close to the performance space.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish, Swedish or English. They were recorded on my phone recorder and transcribed with Microsoft Word. I didn't feel the need to translate all of the text, only the excerpts used in the thesis. To make the process smoother, I used AI, more specifically the paid version of ChatGPT, for translation of the non-English interview excerpts. Since the nature of how people speak is very often in incomplete sentences, sometimes with implied meanings, AI proved ineffective. I found that the AI

sometimes misread the subtext leading to a wrong translation. This is why I translated small sections at a time, so I could easily correct the translation. At times I translated myself.

The aim was not to build a representative sample of the audience, but to gather a small set of varied responses that could shed light on how the event was experienced. The mix of planning and chance felt fitting for this study. Interviewing people right after the performance also made it possible to catch something of the feeling they were leaving with, before the experience had time to turn into a more settled story.

3.2.2. Literature review

The theoretical framework that lies at the core of this research is based in literature. The majority is theatre literature provided by the University of Arts, Theatre Academy library. The sociological lens is provided by writings along the likes of Bourdieu (1886) and Putnam (2000). Hayes's (2006) doctoral study serves as a benchmark combining theatre audience research with sociology. A handful of journal articles provided useful, as well as some essays on theatre.

The process of taking part of the material started in autumn 2025. After the interviews had been conducted in January 2026 the theoretical framework was finalised with an inductive approach. The literature review was made by comparing findings in a synthesis table to help connect overarching themes and structure the chapters. Overall, the literature referred to in this thesis is a representation of my researcher's perspective that is rooted in both knowledge in arts management and theatre.

3.2.3. Autoethnographic observations

When conducting participant observation, it's essential to ensure that the process is carried out in a manner that does not cause participants to become overly self-conscious (Saldana, 2011). Minimising the researcher's visibility and interference is important to capture authentic behaviours and interactions. Participant observation as a method stems

from anthropological studies and ethnographic research (Saldana, 2011). It is a good fit for this study since the subject of interest is people's experience in a social setting.

The focus of my observations was mostly on observing if the interviewee arrived in company or alone, as well as note if they sat down at a table with a performer. Another aspect I kept an eye on was, how long they were staying and who they were sitting with in the shared meal setting post-performance. Since I was also in charge of the food being served at the meal, I was always present in the room for that part. My focus was on answering questions about the food and making sure everyone had what they needed. My position was behind a kitchen counter setup at the side of the space, which allowed me to ever so slightly simultaneously observe the interviewees.

In two out of five performances, I attended the performance part. This was to see if it made a difference in my insight on what the interviewees were describing. I noted that being in the room for the whole time had the benefit of knowing what had happened, since in live performances, all performances are different. Meanwhile, not being present in the room created a curiosity for how it had been, since I hadn't seen it. In this case, I was very often able to sense what the audience was like, in the meal setting. Sometimes I would enter and feel a palpable warmth radiating from the room, other times with less engaged audiences, the feeling was different in the slightest way. These experiences were subjective, but quite instructive combined with the interview material.

The participant observations done in this study, is a small part that completes the content of the interviews. This allows for a more nuanced reading of the different interviews as well as a more agile methodology, when provided with some context (Gallagher et al., 2021).

3.3. Data analysis

The primary method of data analysis in this study is thematic analysis, which I use to identify and interpret patterns across the interview data. Following an initial familiarisation with the transcribed material, I conducted a first cycle of coding inspired by Miles et al. (2014). The process entailed systematically reviewing the transcripts and

highlighting segments that directly and indirectly addressed the research questions, using different colours to distinguish between them.

For categorising all five interviews, I set up a table where the core of the answers by each interviewee were put next to each other for comparing. The layout of the table was instructive for finding similarities and overarching themes. For the purpose of this research being conducted as a master's thesis, five approximately thirty-minute interviews were a manageable source material.

3.4. Research limitations and ethical considerations

In conducting this research, I recognise that certain limitations were inherent to the scope and design of the study. The selection of a single case study required careful consideration of the specific context in which the research was situated. Focusing on a school production, nonetheless an arts university, inevitably shapes the composition of the audience. This might imply an audience which may be more culturally engaged or predisposed to participatory experiences than the general population. As such, the findings of this study are context-specific and not intended to be broadly generalisable, but rather to provide in-depth insights into a particular setting.

Considering the financial barriers, cost is not a significant one, since a regular ticket cost 15€. The barrier is more a question of knowledge of the performance and the habit of attending performances at a more unconventional place. The pitfall of the demographic at hand is to be limited to students at the Theatre Academy, which are very often the main audience aside from friends and family of the working group. Considering that a large part of the audience might be somehow affiliated to the people or the place, it most certainly plays a part in shaping the experience. A limitation to who the interviewees could be, was not to choose a person currently studying at the Theatre Academy, since that might affect the results. Even if students of theatre might prove to be rather knowledgeable on the subject and possibly able to provide in-depth answers, a choice to exclude them was made.

The selection of interviewees was influenced by the practical limitations of my own networks and access. Granted, some were more familiar than others. I have a direct relationship to some and a second-hand relationship to others, considering they were brought by a friend of mine. Saldana (2011) warns about interviewing close friends as it might affect results. My main concern revealed to be the concern of the interviewees appeasing the research subject, trying to answer along the lines of my expectations. This concern led me to try both revealing the research subject in advance and keeping it unknown. In general, I found it better not to reveal it and state an interest in their personal audience experience and let the questions guide them. Even regarding the pitfalls of knowing one's interviewee, the relationship one maintains is of main importance. I found that the ones that could express most critical thoughts of the subject, probably felt familiar and safe enough to do so.

An often expressed criticism of case studies as a concept being the lack of rigour and researcher bias guiding the results (Yin, 2003). From the start, I was adamant at recognising my own values being biased towards community building in theatres, posing the interview questions as neutrally as possible. Despite this, there is an unnamed value behind the choice of research subject, which might still affect the interviewees. Since I was a part of the production team of the performance, I made sure to express to the participants about me not being artistically involved in creating the performance. This was to make sure they weren't afraid to express different kinds of thoughts about the performance.

Considering the participant observations, it's important to note that observations are always subjective. The concept of "evidencing" how an audience is engaging with art is problematic at its core (Sedgman, 2019: 463). Having the interviewees assessing the response of the audience is laden with their own interpretation. The response is important since the research is interested in the narrative of the interviewee, not to map the reality of others.

The literature that was used as a base for the theoretical framework is limited to what I was able to find. Suggestions and helpful materials were provided by my supervisor as well as course material from my studies. However, despite efforts I could not discuss

relevant theories with an expert in theatre. This is why the theatre theory in this thesis is limited to my own knowledge as well as the material of the Helsinki University of Arts library and database. My previous knowledge is credited by a bachelor's degree in applied theatre as well as a multiple year work experience as a theatre maker.

Research ethics is an important consideration having the case revolve around social matters, albeit not in the ranks of handling sensitive medical information (Wiles, 2013). The interviewees all read and signed a consent form, detailing how their information will be processed. The interviewees remain anonymous, where the transcribed material was anonymised as a precaution, despite it not being accessible to anyone else but me. All the material is stored on the University of Arts database, accessible only through my personal account and password. Since the interviews were conducted in three languages; English, Finnish and Swedish, some of the quoted material was translated to English for the purpose of this thesis. To add a layer of anonymity, the research doesn't state which language each of the interviewees were conducted in.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the main findings of this study, which is based on semi-structured interviews with audience members who attended the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0*. The thematic thread of the analysis is to explore how participants experienced the performance around the general themes of participation, shared space and interaction with other audience members. The central focus is how these elements contribute to the perceived sense of community in the context of a theatre event.

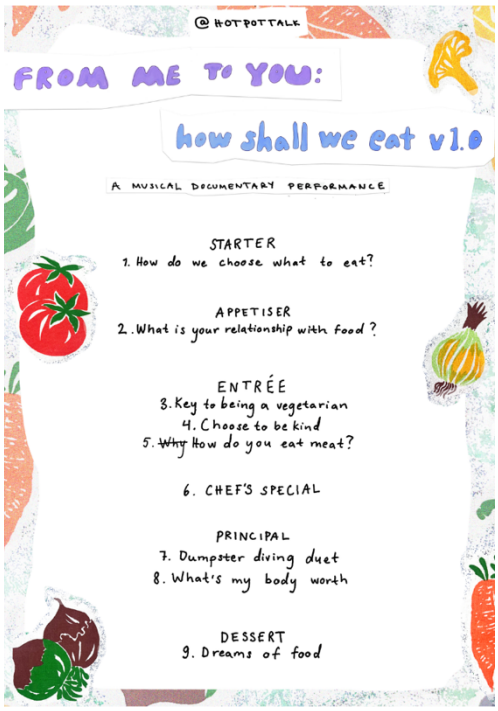
The findings are categorised thematically, illustrating recurring patterns across interviews. The themes are separated into subchapters of varying lengths for clarity, despite them being closely connected. The categories express how the audience experience is formed by the individual journey and the social context. To provide nuance to the findings, the chapter presents autoethnographic observations as a way to contextualise the dynamics of the performance event. The observations are not intended as a primary source of data, but a support for interpretation. The findings are analysed in dialogue with the theoretical framework. This details how the purpose of the audience member is shaped by meaning-making, participation and shared space.

The different interviewees are numbered from one to five. In the chapter they are shortened to the letter I to signify interviewee and the number for separation.

4.1. Introduction to project

Before diving into the findings from the audience interviews, this chapter will concretise the experience of the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* by director Gua Khee Chong. The performance, in essence, is a musical documentary performance about people's relationship to food and how they make choices around what to eat, with a focus on sustainability.

Figure 3 *Cover of audience handout / Performance outline*



Note. Graphic design by Yesol Lim, 2026

The performance takes place at the Helsinki University of the Arts, Theatre Academy. One enters the building and finds a vast space called “tori”, which is Finnish for market square. This is simultaneously the foyer for the audience as it is a walkthrough/hangout space for students as well as a seating area for the lunch restaurant. The audience is handed the handout which is in the form of a menu whilst functioning as a thematic performance outline (see Figure 3 above). The director steps out to greet the audience with a thorough briefing for what is to come. Then the door to the studio (see Figure 4 below) is opened and as the audience will be handling some food items, going by the hand-washing station is the first thing on the agenda. The audience is offered aprons to prevent possible staining of clothes. As one finds a seat at the four-person table of choice, laid out are root vegetables and peelers for everyone. It is stated that soup will be prepared with vegetables that the previous audience has peeled. The whitebox space is lit up with mood lighting and some atmospheric live music is playing as one starts peeling the vegetables for the next audience, perhaps chatting to the fellow audience members at the table, simultaneously waiting for everyone to find their seats. The two actors are also sitting at two of the audience tables.

Figure 4 *Audience gathered before the performance*



Note. Photo by Patrik Pesonius, 2026

Everyone in the audience has found their seat and the studio door is closed to signify the start. The actors, who are sitting and chopping vegetables at two separate audience tables, get up and walk to a designated kitchen work bench in the space and pour their chopped vegetables into a pot on a hotplate. The performance starts with a song about how to choose what to eat. As the performance progresses with a mix of monologues and songs based on documentary material, the actors are moving around the space, at times joining the audience at their tables. As one finishes with the peeling, many start being creative with the peels, making art pieces on the tables whilst listening to the performance (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 5 *Audience making peel art*



Note. Photo by Titus Torniainen, 2026

During the performance, the actors offer some cherry tomatoes and banana with peel to taste, that are relevant to the stories told. As the performance is coming to a close, someone from each table gets to read aloud some dreams of food that another audience member has written on a piece of paper. Everyone then gets to write down their thoughts for the next audience. The official performance has now ended, the audience is welcomed to stay in the space to enjoy the soup that has been cooked during the performance, as well as some dumpster dived pastries and fruit. One eats some soup at the table, perhaps chatting to the other people at the table and then call it a night.

Figure 6 *Actors singing*



Note. Photo by Patrik Pesonius, 2026

4.2. Theatre as a shared experience

In most theatres, one experiences the performances together with an audience. How relevant the other theatre visitors are for the experience varies. In the following section, I will explore how the interviewees experienced the performance as well as the other audience members in the room. Aside from analysing the findings I will reference back to the theoretical framework. The different titles represent themes that arose from the interviews.

4.2.1. Atmosphere

Setting up an inviting atmosphere is integral for making the audience feel at ease. The amount of people one knows or how familiar one is with the venue shouldn't restrict attendance. According to Hayes (2006) people tend to feel excluded from groups which they don't believe they have access to. When the interviewees received the question about first impressions of the performance, many remarked on the meditativeness of the atmosphere, remarking on how at ease it made them feel. I1 commented on how the live

music that was playing helped relax the situation, as they can sometimes feel nervous in similar situations, not knowing what's coming. I4 remarked on how the beginning almost made them forget that they are about to see a performance, as it felt like they were chatting to people at lunchtime. It shows that many people might be nervous for entering new surroundings, but there are ways to ease them into it, like live music in this instance.

> *Easy space to be in… I felt like the live music really made a difference there. – I1*

4.2.2. Expectations for the role of the audience

All of the interviewees had either read a bit about the performance in advance or flipped through the handout whilst waiting to go into the space. A lot of them remarked on how they were surprised at how participatory the role of the audience was. Except I4 who commented on how they thought the setting would be like a workshop.

> *I think my expectation was that I would maybe expect a less participatory experience, more of a performance with an audience, like a traditional performance. -I2*

4.2.3. Participation through action

Many of the interviewees mentioned how having something to do with one's hands, helped in creating a relaxed atmosphere when you are seated with people you don't know from before. I4 mentioned how they stopped peeling the vegetables as the performance started but as they noticed the other audience members continuing, they realised they could drift in and out of the activity, sometimes watching and sometimes paying attention in other ways whilst peeling. I2 echoed the sentiment on drifting in and out of the peeling but also mentioned it as a way to reflect on the subject and turn the focus inward. They also mentioned how peeling the vegetables felt purposeful, like they were helping. Marinetti (1913) mentioned in their manifesto about the physical engagement of the audience to shake up their passive state. Granted the suggested ways of activation were in Marinetti's case (1913) rather provocative with provoking fights between audience

members, the essence of the aim is similar. By physically activating the audience, the social encounter became smoother and thus having the experience be less isolated to oneself or one's own company.

> *I realized I could pay attention in other ways, like continuing with this activity that is very passive and it's nice to have something to do with your hands when you're sitting with people you just met. Of course, it also makes the situation more relaxed. – I4*

4.2.4. Participatory elements and awareness of others

The 21st century has brought about a reconsideration of the role of the audience of contemporary theatre, in many cases towards a more participatory direction (Gardner, 2007; Heim, 2016). As the spectator is "emancipated" according to the words of Rancière (2011), it doesn't necessarily mean that the audience needs to be actively involved in the action. In *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* there are some participatory elements before the shared meal segment that occurs after the performance. When on the subject about how the elements affected the experience of others in the room, I5 mentioned that the vegetables broke the ice for their table as someone asked about snacking on the carrots in the last performance (it was allowed). Comical situations arose likewise for many of the interviewees, when the audience was offered to taste banana peels. I3 and I5 commented on funny reactions of disgust in fellow tablemates and how laughter helped build a relaxed atmosphere between people. Hayes's (2006) research echoes this by concluding that performances that activate their audience are often effective in forming a sense of community. I2 explained how when at the end of the performance, the audience was reading dreams of food-notes written by previous audiences, made them notice other people in the room. They described being immersed in the subject during the performance. Hearing the voices of other audience members made them realise that they were together in the same space, each with their own relationship to the topic. It serves as an example of how the participatory elements create an awareness and awakens empathy.

(about hearing the dreams of food notes) It awakened something, maybe I had been more inside my head before, thinking about my own relationship to food. And then suddenly I realised: here are all these people sitting here, and everyone has their own relationship to food. – I2

4.2.5. Shared experience

When asked about whether they felt a part of something shared, many of the interviewees remarked on how the vegetable peeling was an important aspect. The fact that the soup they are to be served, is prepared by a previous audience and themselves peeling the vegetables for the next one, created a continuum to be connected across performances. I2 commented that the aroma of the boiling soup that was slowly spreading in the space, created a comforting feeling, like they were being taken care of. Also sharing the same activity helped in creating a feeling of connectedness. I1 remarked how also the subject of the performance, which was food, is so universal that everyone has a connection to it. According to Heim (2016) the mere act of shared cognitive meaning making of experiencing something together is enough to create a connection, here supported by an activity and the universal subject. Reflecting on the shared experience for the people attending the same performance, *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* takes it a step further. The acts of service carried out for the next audience, created something tangible to connect audiences over the span of days. As the audience feels taken care of by a previous audience, they want to pass on the favour to the next one.

I don't know the other people, but we share an understanding and a shared experience. Even if we don't speak. – I1

I started to smell the soup… It was this very aromatic, warm smell, the kind of smell that feels safe somehow…And knowing that someone was cooking for all of us…that created a very warm feeling for me. – I2

4.2.6. Own and audience response

Inquiry shows that audience response is a valid measurement of the mechanisms of community, as the individual in the audience might perceive their own feelings of involvement through it (Hayes, 2006:28). The responses of the interviewees varied some from performance to performance. I3 thought the audience wasn't the most responsive, that everyone seemed to be a bit in their own bubbles. The two phrases confirm Hayes's (2006) statement about audience response being a uniting factor. Laughing out loud together reveals shared understanding of the performance. This is confirmed by Hayes' (2006) statement about audience response signifying shared meanings amongst the audience (Hayes, 2006). I5 stated how they felt like the people at their table were quite open and outwardly responsive which was helpful for feeling at ease. This created some humorous situations with the banana peels, which has proven to be a common factor through the different performances. I4 commented on the contagiousness of audience laughter in similar situations. However, Elam (2002) states communication between audience members having the potential to create a homogenous response. In this case, where the setting nurtures interaction between audience members, the response might very well be socially affected. One's reaction might be quite visible for one's tablemates and a mirroring of reactions might occur. There is a fine line between feeling comfortable to respond openly and feeling the social pressure of reacting in a certain way. None of the interviewees however expressed a more widely spread social coercion of the situation. Heim (2016) on the other end even frames community as liberating and Elam (2002) confirms the humanness of surrendering oneself to the group during a performance.

> *It was quite interesting to watch, because some people were clearly the kind who maybe make theatre themselves, or knew the performers very well, or had spent a lot of time in that space and similar spaces. They reacted very openly, commenting almost out loud and laughing out loud. – I5*

4.2.7. Audience size

Four of the five performances had a full house audience. In two of the performances two extra chairs were put in. When asked about if the house capacity had an influence on the experience, many agreed that a full house was a positive thing for the experience. I3

commented on how a capacity audience reacting creates a sort of collective power that manifests itself as a feeling of togetherness. They reflected on how they might've felt too exposed had there been empty seats. I5 described how they might have felt more nervous for the situation if the house wasn't at capacity. Inquiry affirms the experience of a full house aiding in providing the confidence to respond (Bennett, 1997). I2 attended the one performance which wasn't full and they felt disappointed that there were two empty chairs at their table. They reflected on how this might've had the consequence that they were mostly turning inwards during the performance. They were sitting with one other person, who they knew from before. Research confirms the importance of the collective nature of the event playing a part of the enjoyment of theatre (Ostrower, 2008).

> *...somehow like you become too visible if there are too few people. But when there are many people, it feels more like we've gathered here together around something, and the performance also feels somehow fuller... It does feel like there's some kind of collective force. – I3*

> *It would have been nice to have other people sitting closer, across from me, so I could kind of see their reactions and feel that sense of mirroring. – I2*

4.2.8. Setting of the space

The setting of the space will set the tone for participation in an arts context (Radbourne, 2013). I5 remarked on how big of a role the arrangement of the seating played in creating connections. They noted how in regular theatres, you might only communicate a "sorry" to whoever you're passing as you are trying to navigate to your seat. An artistic choice to not give immunity from social or physical contact, resulted in an emphasised effect of the collective over individual (Elam, 2002). Since the start of the performance was sort of slow, with a mumble of voices, it was easier to strike up a conversation with whom you were seated next to.

Almost all the interviewees remarked on the fact that the audience and stage were not separated, helping create the feeling of being together. I2 mentioned that having everyone, including the technician's table be lit up, as well as being greeted by the

director, felt like you were invited in. Bennet (1997) warns about the social implications of cheap tickets being furthest away, whereas the setting of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* communicated an equal ground. The fact that the performers were moving, giving every table their moment of close-up encounter, eliminated the aspect of good and bad seats. The fact that the people in the audience were in the line of sight for each other also confirmed Hayes's (2006) statement of heightening the awareness of the event as a shared experience.

> *It didn't happen on a separate stage, it happened in the middle of us. And somehow that's exactly what made it feel communal as well…And I'm sure it also mattered that the performers were moving around everywhere. It affected where you looked. – I1*

4.3. Spectator to participant

The audience of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.*0 is shifting between spectating and participating to various degrees during the performance. As the "official" performance is over, the audience is served soup and some dumpster dived pastries and fruit. This occasion is less facilitated, meaning one is free to move around in the space, eat and have conversations. I briefed the interviewees pre-show, that they are allowed to stay as long or as little as they like in the post-performance meal and to seek me out when they were ready, which was different for each interviewee.

4.3.1. Experiencing others before and after the performance

Theatre is a relational event, regardless if you go in company or not since, present is always other audience members, performers and perhaps ushers (Heim, 2016). When the interviewees reflected on how they viewed the other audience members pre-show and post-show during the shared meal, all of them mentioned some kind of a change of perception. I5 commented on how it was easier to approach or strike up a conversation

with their tablemates. The audience members were free to move places during the meal, I3 mentioned that the one person they didn't know at the table did move for the meal. But many of the interviewees commented on a silent agreement of the audience members of the table to sit together. I1 mentioned how the strongest sense of belonging arose with their tablemates, a perception of a "we" or a group mentality. I4 enjoyed the fact that the setting allowed them to be more cognisant of the other people in the room and that observing them was socially acceptable. I3 mentioned the fact that sharing a similar experience with people might bridge a social situation in the future if they happen to meet outside the performance. I2 stated that they felt like the audience consisted of few when they were waiting to enter, but a lot more afterwards, perhaps as a reflection of the mental space the performance was taking up. I2 also mentioned that it is common for them to feel a belonging with an audience having shared a theatre experience, which is not unlike the community of feeling Turner (1974) describes. Proving that the shared cognitive meaning-making that occurs, has a strong effect on some (Heim, 2016). Even as in other types of performances you might not share a conversation with others, present is still a silent togetherness (Rancière, 2021).

> *It's a very common feeling when I've seen a performance with a group of people in the same room, afterwards I feel a sense of connection with them…So you have this kind of common ground. Something that didn't exist before, since everyone comes from different contexts. – I2*

> *I imagine that's what happened: people went in with complete strangers, maybe wondering where to sit, and then it somehow became easy. There was this kind of feeling of togetherness. – I1*

4.4. Broader reflections that tie into society

Moving along from the performance at hand and reflecting on meanings of audience experience was where the interviews concluded. The reflections started on questions around a somewhat philosophical discussion on the meaning of being an audience. Moving forwards to the social effects of similar experiences between strangers. Finally

concluding in a reflection on theatre as an artform and what kind of part it might play in society.

4.4.1. The meaning of audience experience

The expectations an audience has for their role in theatre, can be a mirror for the models of social interaction and positions of power one holds in society (Freshwater, 2009). When reflecting on what it means to be an audience, I1 stated very clearly that it depends on the kind of performance. Sometimes they want to be lost in the crowd in the rows of seats, to have a kind of anonymity in the face of the performance. Although, they commented on how in *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* they felt rather visible without feeling the urge to hide. This kind of audience role will almost create a shared responsibility for the performance. The answer of I3 reflected a profound appreciation for the arts, stating how it's important for them to support art that is being made. Even if they find something to be bad, the feeling they leave with is being an experience richer. I2 was expressing similar thought-processes, i.e. about how being an audience for them means taking part of something the working group has been living with, processing and is now sharing. I4 and I5 both reflected on the meaning of audience through their own experience of performing. I4 said being an audience is being curious and nurturing ideas. I5 commented on how the audience uplifts the performers with their presence. They noted how big of a role the sense of community plays in an audience, without maybe even people realising it in the moment. Esslin's (1985) statement about theatre reminding the audience of the rules of social coexistence is not unrelated to the answers. Many of the interviewees express a high appraisal for the intrinsic value of arts but also an agency for the individuals in the audience. The answers reflect an awareness of their presence as an audience having a meaningful impact on the moment.

> *...when I go to see something, it's because I'm curious about it. Yeah, I think it's mostly curiosity.*
> *– I4*

> *There's the audience and the sense of community really make a big difference to the experience, even if you don't necessarily think about it in the moment.*
> *– I5*

4.4.2. Social implications of the audience experience

When on the subject about the social implications of the event at hand or similar events might have, some of the interviewees mentioned encounters. I1 remarked how an event like this might provide a human interaction for someone who might not have enough of it in their everyday life. They reflected on how the circumstance of the performance might facilitate the interaction and simultaneously lower the threshold of meeting new people. Survival studies confirm the well-being effect of community, and enhancing the connectedness of people serves that purpose (Hyyppä, 2013). I4 counted that the places to meet people are often limited to school or work, confirming Bourdieu's (1986) statement that the most durable networks are institutionalised. I4 reflected on how unexpected social encounters like for the audience of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* can serve as a motivation to visit other kinds of arts events. They commented on how the social interaction felt easy, which might work for people who otherwise might not be sociable. I5 shared that they were seated next to someone that they knew has an authority position in relation to a friend of theirs. They noted how the setting of the performance created an equal ground between them and a person they wouldn't otherwise have the chance to engage in casual conversation with. The shared experience was the common ground that according to Etchells (2007) is a temporary community. This was heightened by the perceived hierarchy that was at least in some way left outside the moment. I2 was more sceptical of the greater social implications, but thought the space provided a safe environment to reflect on the theme. However, Hayes (2006) is of the opinion that it is not idealistic to assume that theatre has the potential to affect social change through its community.

> *It kind of brings a social contact into your day. Not everyone necessarily has that, but something like this kind of performance can create it, you just come into the presence of other people, and then it maybe becomes easier to start talking. – I1*

> *Now I feel very drawn to say that it can increase a sense of togetherness, but I'm not sure if I really believe that. I think I'm starting to realise at this stage*

> *in my life that what I experience isn't necessarily what everyone else experiences. – I2*

4.4.3. Broader reflections on theatre and society

The last question that was posed to the interviewees was a question of larger implications of theatre in society. I3 was reflecting on how the stories of theatre have the potential to open worlds and thought processes unfamiliar to you. They compared it to cinema stating how they watch theatre more empathetically since it's happening in the moment. I4 considered theatre to be an artform most affected by technological developments. They mention how they and other people have the habit of going to the cinema or a concert but often forget that theatre is an option too. In Hayes' (2006) research respondents were also drawing comparisons between the activeness of watching theatre between the more passive viewing of mediated performance. Rancière's (2021) categorisation affirms theatre as something that has the purpose of mobilising the bodies in the audience. Since cinema attendance is also a communal experience for the audience, the difference to theatre is that the performing is also happening in the moment. I5 frames theatre as a versatile artform, since it's a combination of many crafts. I3 stated that the "imperfect" nature of theatre art being something that draws them in.

I2 brought up the valid point that certain performances and performance spaces attract a crowd that share similar values. Studies affirm this suspicion, since frequent attendees of theatre tend to be otherwise active in civic life (Ostrower, 2008). How does one then implement the theatre as a "rehearsal space for democracy", as Burzyńska (2016:6) phrases it, if the ones joining are not a true reflection of all of society? I2 emphasised that the true effect on society is making sure the audience is diverse or even taking shows to different places to remove some of the barriers of attendance. Is touring perhaps the unsung hero of accessibility, taking the art outside the comfort of institutions and to the proximity of everyday life.

I2 reflected on the previously stated meditativeness of the atmosphere of *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* and how it provided a refuge in an otherwise fast paced society. Reflecting also on how the fast pace exacerbates the polarisation of society, when the

tempo results in impactful crashes and conflicts. I2 enhanced how in the space shared meanings might arise when people are sharing a pulse, meaning sitting and sharing the moment. I4 echoed the sentiment of having a breathing room in the performance space as a refuge from an otherwise chaotic life. They reflected on how thoughts might arise in these moments that one might not give space for in other times. As Brecht (2015/1964) and Boal (2002) wants to provoke the audience as a method of affecting change, previous interview answers show that not always being necessary to achieve social effects.

> *I think that the fast pace of society is one of the things that makes polarisation stronger, the clashes become more intense…One of the first things I felt was that the space was almost meditative. I think it can slow things down, allowing everyone to find a kind of shared pulse for a while. – I2*

> *…people go more to see the movies or to see films than theatre. And then they miss this life experience. – I4*

4.5. Autoethnographic observations

Observing the interviewees was not aimed to be a main method of data collection. Saldana (2011) warns about the pitfalls of participants becoming weary, if they feel observed. However, some observations provide context for the interviewee answers, which is instructive for the analysis. The two actors were sitting at two separate audience tables in the beginning. They were chopping vegetables to be put in the soup. For an audience member entering, they weren't sticking out too much of a regular audience member from a distance. Across the performances three out of five interviewees sat down at a table with an actor. Since the actors were initiating conversation, many were engulfed in conversation because of it.

I1 attended the performance with a familiar person. They sat down at a table where an actor was sitting. They were also joined by an audience member they didn't know from before. I1 stated in the interviews that they were discussing with the whole table before the performance and sat there for the shared meal and discussed for a while.

I2 attended the performance which wasn't at capacity. They sat with one other person familiar from before and two empty chairs for the duration of the performance and expressed disappointment in not having someone new at their table. For the shared meal, they both moved to another table where they knew the people.

I3 attended the performance with a familiar person. They sat at a table with two people they knew from before and one new person. They mentioned that they shared some words to the unfamiliar person at their table but were mostly speaking to people they knew from before. I3 mentioned that they stayed at their table for the meal, but the person they didn't know from before switched to another table.

I4 attended the performance alone. They sat down at a table with an actor and two people they didn't know from before. They mentioned how they were discussing with everyone at their table. They also stayed at the table for the meal and continued the conversation.

I5 attended the performance alone. They sat down at a table with an actor and three people they didn't know from before (one extra chair was put in). They commented on having conversations with everyone at their table and stayed there for the meal to continue the conversation. I5 remarked that they exchanged contact details with one of the people at the table.

The observations shed some light on factors that encourage communication with strangers. First and foremost, the actors that were sitting at the table acted as facilitators for conversation. Having someone initiate and ask questions in the beginning has a significant impact on setting the social situation in motion. Another factor visible in this case is attending alone or with someone. The interviewees that attended alone or even simply with one person, ended up talking to new people. Having space for preferably more than one new person at the table, makes the ground more equal for social initiation. Having many people, one knows from before, prompts the want to catch up with them over small talk with strangers. However, if the aim is to increase contact, facilitation and attending alone are two effective ways.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to examine how a sense of community is perceived and experienced by audience members attending the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0.* The study has been conducted by investigating which factors contribute or limit this experience as well as viewing the theatre audience as a microcosm of society. This concluding chapter will present the core of the findings in four thematic categories as well as bring forth concrete suggestions for theatres or art institutions. Finally, suggestions for further research are presented.

5.1. Summary of findings

The findings of this study can be divided into four categories: theatre as a shared experience, low-threshold embodied participation, emergence of temporary community, and situational social impact.

Theatre as a shared experience

The experience of theatre is generally dependent on co-presence, meaning that the bodies present are the performers and the audience. The spatial design is a key factor in enabling not only the awareness of other people in the performance space, but of the shared nature of the event. Favouring an unconventional seating plan, over multiple rows of seats, for the audience is an effective tool. For example, like in *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* the audience was grouped around multiple smaller tables, with four members of the audience per table. The seating arrangement had them facing each other. Similar groupings of audience members create contact merely through bodily directions, increasing the visibility and awareness of other audience members. The performers were sharing the same level, moving between tables in the performance. This removal of a separate audience and stage communicated an equal ground between the audience and the performers. The space echoed this by being visually united through an even lighting of everyone in the space, including the technician's table.

However, creating groupings of people might not be enough to facilitate communication. Leaving some space for communication is integral. For example, a slow start to the

performance, letting the audience in before the designated start time is one way of leaving space for the shared experience. Leaving “gaps” for transitions, such as starting slowly comes with some demands for the ambience. A careful setting of the atmosphere to match the desired mood goes a long way. In the case study, the live music playing throughout but most importantly in the beginning, helped calm the nerves of audience members as well as bridge the transition into the space. The activation of different senses had a comforting effect; seeing the colourful vegetables and the mood lighting, hearing the music and seeing the musicians as well as smelling the scent of the soup.

Low threshold embodied participation

To ease the social barriers of the performance setting providing participatory elements that are voluntary proved effective. In the case study, having the audience be provided with vegetables and peelers created a simple task for them. Engaging in a low threshold activity by peeling vegetables, bridged the connections to other audience members seated at the same table. The slow start of the performance was not void of meaning as one could engage in low demanding physical activity. The provided activity helped create subjects of discussion for audience members unknown to each other sharing a table. Being able to drift in an out of the simple activity of peeling over the course of the performance gave the audience members agency. Many carried on creating art pieces made from the peels, on the tables, from being inspired by engaging one’s hands. Drifting between the role of viewing and listening to the performance.

It was integral that the activity of peeling had a purpose. The audience was peeling vegetables for the soup the next audience would be enjoying, as well as being served soup with vegetables peeled by the previous audience. Aside from providing meaning and agency through participation, it created a connection across performances. This was emphasised by also being able to read notes the previous audience had written and writing notes for the upcoming audience within the context of the performance.

Temporary community

The sheer act of shared meaning making of the audience members will create the feeling of temporary community. However, the table setting of the performance formed micro communities within the audience. A major factor in aiding connections was the

facilitation of the actors in the beginning. Having them sit at tables initiating conversation amongst the audience members had a bridging effect. In the pool of interviewees, the ones who chose a table with an actor, reported having had conversations with people unfamiliar from before. This means that one should not underestimate the power of facilitation in instigating. At play was also the fact that attending alone or in minimal company, increased the chance of connecting with new people. This means that the social situation will invite communication when open for it. Laughter also worked as a mechanism of enabling community, when the audience got the chance to taste unusual food items. Confirming Hayes's (2006) thesis about how activating your audience is effective in community building.

The capacity of the audience proved a contributing factor for the feeling of collective force. When the audience is at capacity, one feels less exposed and simultaneously part of a group, which affects the experience positively.

Situational social impact

The social impact of the performance *From me to you: how shall we eat v.1.0* was situational. The connections made during the performance created the collective atmosphere for the people in the space. Sharing the performance moment with strangers might slow down the pace of a couple individuals in a fast-paced society. However, a diversification of the audience might bring more far-reaching social effects.

5.2. Implications for practise

For theatre or arts institutions hoping to create space for community in their practise, my suggestions based on the outcome of this study, are the following:

Lowering barriers

This means diversifying the audience through outreach and affordable ticket prices. Adopting a "slow start" or other gap in the performance context to give space for audience encounter. The goal is to be inviting, making each visitor feel welcome.

Intentional atmosphere

Thinking through the setting upon audience entry, creating ambience with music, lighting and other sensory elements.

Designing for meetings

Reconsider audience seating. Create space that enhances the visibility of other audience members. Enable smaller groupings of different people.

Low threshold activities for audience

Introduce something tangible the audience can do with their hands either as part of the performance or in the performance context.

Post-performance interaction

Informal, but facilitated events like meals or discussion events occurring after performances that extend the experience and facilitate interaction.

5.3. Suggestions for further research

For further research I suggest considering the theatre building as a space of community. This means researching how expanding the role of the theatre building, might influence audience diversity. During the finalisation of this thesis in spring 2026 an article about the ecosystem of theatre in Swedish in Finland was released (Englin et al., 2026). The article suggests theatre buildings to expand their operations to include cafés or other open spaces, to invite different visitors (Englin et al., 2026: 24). Future research could take the form of a case study examining the effects of initiatives aimed at opening up theatre buildings as accessible social spaces. Such research could explore how increased engagement with the physical space may support a sense of inclusion and belonging, and whether it encourages more diverse audiences to attend performances.

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APPENDICES

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A.Immediate experience of the performance

1. What are your first thoughts after the performance? What affected you?
2. What were your expectations before the performance, and how did they compare with what you experienced?
3. How did the experience make you feel, emotionally or physically?
4. How did you respond to the performance during?
5. How do you feel that the audience as a whole responded?
6. How do you think the size of the audience affected the response at this performance?

B. Sense of community and shared space

7. Did you talk about the performance to anyone afterwards? Who? About what?
8. During the performance, did you feel part of something shared with others in the room? In what way?

If no - Did the presence of other audience members influence your experience of the performance in any way?

9. When you reflect on how you experienced the other members of the audience pre-performance compared to the shared meal afterwards, was there a difference?
10. How do you think the setting of the space affected this?

C. Meaning and broader reflection

11. What does it mean to you to “be an audience” in a theatre like this?
12. What kinds of social effects, if any, do you think experiences like this can have among people who do not know each other?
13. A. Do you think experiences like this can influence how people relate to one another beyond the theatre, especially in times of social tension?
    B. Do you think theatre can influence society?