

Why arts in schools ?

A speech by Birgitte Holt Nielsen, *Producer, Den Jyske Opera (DK)*

Food for thought – enriching teaching was the title of this conference. Food for thought is very appealing to me – seen as nourishment for thoughts of a deeper nature, thoughts that lead us to new places, to new understandings. But the other part of the title “enriching teaching” makes me feel like asking myself:

How do we as artists and arts institution take the best steps to enrich teaching? And can we fulfill our core obligation to provide artistic nourishment and offer children (or people of any age) important existential reflections through art. Can we enrich the lives of children by enriching teaching?

Do we protect the child’s right to be taken seriously as a human being, and not just as a pupil, experiencing and sensing art by devoting itself to the poetic moment? Its right to experience, to see itself and its own life reflected in the stories, the words, the music, the theatre, the emotions that we convey through art.

If we accept art to be instrumental as a tool in a teaching curriculum, are we not standing in risk of committing collective suicide together with all the other artforms?

The Danish researcher and PHD Casper Hvenegaard Rasmussen of IVA, Royal School of Library and Information at Copenhagen Uni, has written a chronicle with the title: “Let go of Culture”. Here he claims that the instrumentalization of arts and culture is furthering what he calls the Implosion of Culture. With a reference to the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s theory about implosion of power. Baudrillard claims that when citizens stop taking an interest in the people in power, power itself implodes. Thus we see a direct threat to democracy in these years, where politicians lose more and more credibility among their people. The same way with arts and culture. If we lose faith in ourselves and in the power and importance of art in its own right – for instance by letting our work be used for other purposes, the position of art is weakened instead of strengthened. Art becomes indifferent, like a product in a TV-shop.

In my mind we have a great responsibility towards the children and towards the art. The best we can do is to create artistic offers in schools that are developed from

exactly the same artistic necessity as all other productions we do. If I had to choose between teaching children to be interested in opera, the heritage of opera and classical music or the formal knowledge of these and offering an honest and autonomous artistic experience of the moment, I would choose the latter anytime. Saying this I do not mean that all the other things should not happen, too, but if we accept that the reason for working for instance in school is to create better students of science, maths, language or even good behavior I think we are working against our own purpose in the Arts.

I believe that the best we can do is to provide children with important – sometimes even difficult – stories and themes in ways that uses the strength that lies in a multi sensory artform like opera. Because of the way we express the story through music, through fantasies, through body and visual expressions, we can do this. Not to be afraid of taking up difficult issues, but to do this in ways that respect the child's capacity and understanding. Never underestimate your audience, especially not children. Issues that seem very controversial to adults may not be so to children.

Last Spring, we at Danish National Opera opened a coproduction with a regional theatre Limfjordsteatret with the title *At the End of the Tunnel* –and I would like to present some small excerpts of this as an example of how we tried to treat a difficult subject like anxiety and loneliness in a 10-year-old boy. The opera was partly devised with the whole team, and we all provided examples and materials from our own experiences with anxiety, loneliness, insecurity and related things. We used experiences from our own childhood, from being parents, from research and from materials from children.

We never discussed whether it was an opera or a play, or whether it should create opera lovers at a later point. The format of the show was created in order to give the children the deepest experience and the best possibility of identifying with the story and the theme. The music was composed to create impact in exactly the way that felt right to convey the content of the story to the children. Music from *The Magic Flute* was used, contorted, rewritten and mixed with other musical expressions, not to teach Mozart or *The Magic Flute*, but because the sound and ambience of Mozart's music felt as the right expression of loneliness and isolation.

Most of the show goes on inside a big tent or a kind of bubble, and thus the audience is taken through The Tunnel and directly into Tom's troubled mind. We see his drawings and fantasy characters becoming alive – his mother and father become the king and queen of the fairy tale, where Tom tries to overcome his fears and save their kingdom from the dangerous dragon. But everyday scenes break into the fairy tale. Tom's parents are worried about their son and his isolation, and they try to help him in the ways that they think are right. But in spite – or maybe even because - of all their love for their child they fail to see him as he really is and they all become more and more frustrated, and this makes Tom's situation more and more difficult. As the story develops, it becomes clear to Tom – and to the audience – that he will have to break through. I believe that many parents will recognize situations where they inadvertently did things that upset their child, for instance when our children witness scenes between their parents that they were not supposed to be part of. And the scene where Tom for the first time asks his parents to respect his needs and see him as he is, is a very strong ending of the show – but also for the audience an invitation to reflect and think about what will happen next.

And, this is where the teachers come into the picture in a very meaningful way – and where art can enrich teaching (and vice versa): Through the reflection, discussion, re-living of the artistic experience. In conversations based on mutual respect, where the adult respects that the child is the expert of being a child, and the art is not an instrument but a mirror.

I will conclude this presentation, quoting a boy from the audience at a show performed in a special school for children with obesity problems. He found out that the tour would also bring the show to his hometown and was delighted to hear this and he said these heart-breaking words:

“I so want my parents to see this show. Then they will understand how I really feel, without me having to tell them! “