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Economics of the Performing Arts

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## **Essay #1 : Environmental Theater**

**Signa & The Ruby Town Oracle**

## **Introduction**

Most theater productions are being staged in buildings, which were designed and build for that specific purpose. Nevertheless, there are alternative production approaches to the traditional separation of actors and audience via means of the so called *Environmental Theater*. This concept was theorized upon first by professor of Performance Studies at NYU Richard Schechner, defining it as a form of theater that enables the audience to become part of a collective and escape anonymity through participation (Schechner, 1973; Fischer-Lichte, 1997). Danish/Austrian collective Signa represents an interesting case of an organization that produces experimental and cutting-edge performing art on *Environmental Stages*. Naturally, the notion of Signa's performances varies greatly from established productions and so does the financial structure of the organization. Their approach towards both the audience and the financial matters shall be approached in terms of their performance design and modes of financing.<sup>i</sup> In order to being able to make clear statements, the performance *The Ruby Town Oracle* shall be used as an illustration.

## **The Organization**

Signa's performances take Schechners (1973) Environmental Theater to the extreme. They break the boundaries between the audience and the actors by creating performance installations outside of theaters in abandoned buildings. The chosen areas are transformed to akin of themed spaces with no similarities to a traditional stage. The audience is free, invited and encouraged to explore the space and interact with the actors in a setting that is surrealistically real. The more the spectator is willing to engage and interact with the plot and the conditions of the "set", the more realistic the experience will become and the boundaries between reality and fiction are becoming blurred (Schwartz, 2013). As Signa's performances can take duration from up to nine days straight, the spectator is not bound to a fixed schedule but will be incorporated individually into the flow of the living installation (Petrova, 2011). At the same time, the actors are having fixed roles with carefully composed background stories but without a precise script. Moreover, the stage in all its elements and with its requisites is carefully put together in every detail to an extend that the productions are simulating reality

(Keim, 2011). Furthermore, all senses are being provoked via sound, odor and light installations. Last but not least are the contents chosen by Signa of a disturbing nature, involving pain, sex, violence and (political) power (Petrova, 2011). In that context, the names of previous performances such as *Seven Tales of Misery* or *Club Inferno* evoke mixed expectations.

At the same token, it becomes evident that Signa's installations are out of the ordinary and traditional funding might be difficult to apply for. Governmental subsidies are often distributed according to certain set of quality measures (Towse, 2010; Radbourne, 2009). According to Radbourne et al. (2009) the optimal measure for quality would be a combination of measuring repeated attendance and the fulfillment of four extra criteria, namely knowledge transmission, risk management (content), authenticity and collective engagement. Whereas the former is difficult to assess for Signa performances as for changing locations and countries, the latter criteria are all being fulfilled. Nevertheless, Sørensen and Köstler indicated during an interview in 2009, that the Danish funding mentality is mainly based on having an international reputation (Groot Nibbelink, 2012). Therefore, they developed a financing structure for their performances that is independent from subsidies and helped overcome the uncertain economics of the performing arts.

A new production is only being created, when Signa is invited by theater to create an installation (Köstler, 25.02.2014). The interested partner is been given a draft budget that indicates the costs and components of a performance, excluding costs for security measures and fixed costs of the theater itself. Upon the budget and means of the theater the size of the installation is being established. According to Köstler (25.02.2014), once a budget is established, Signa does not exceed it. In essence, Signa 'outsources' its variable costs and makes use of fixed cost components of the inviting theater such as technicians. In addition, the risk of selling the tickets is entirely with the inviting party, but at the same time, Signa does not receive eventual profit from ticket sales (Köstler, 25.02.2014). Moreover, the uncertainty remains in terms of Signa's own fixed costs, which have to be covered. Bookkeeping, administration, processing, communication, renewal of technical equipment and alike. Köstler (25.02.2014) estimates the fixed costs at €100,000. Although they are currently receiving subsidies from the Danish Art Council, they only cover about 38% of the fixed costs and the yearly amount shows a downward tendency. Hence, Sørensen and Köstler need to generate extra income through seminars and alike

or contribute with their savings (Köstler, 25.02.2014). In order to cope with the fixed costs and the insecure subsidy situation, the percentage charged for administration fees has been increased to 5% of the total budget. Furthermore, the salaries of both Sørensen and Köstler are being paid from the budgets, leaving them with approximately three month without an income.<sup>ii</sup> The three month period is reserved for preparation and maintenance. In essence, although Signa is not burdened with the notorious venue operating and maintenance costs and can impose sunk cost components such as rehearsal time and costumes onto the inviting party, earned and unearned income are not sufficient to cover all costs in the long run (Towse, 2010; Köstler, 25.02.2014).

### ***The Ruby Town Oracle***

In 2007 the *Schauspielhaus Köln* invited Signa to create a performance and offered them an abandoned house for the installation. In accordance with Signa's customary creative process, they developed the installation *The Ruby Town Oracle* only after the space was decided upon (Burckhardt & Behrendt, 2008). The basic concept was the following. A remote village controlled by the military of another state and inhabited by descendants of Martha Rubin was being set up (Schwartz, 2013). One group of actors was assigned to be the military, another to be the inhabitants. During the course of five month the set design was being assembled, using material from abandoned mining villages and flea markets (Burckhardt & Behrendt, 2008). All actors, amateurs and professionals, participated free of charge both in the set-up period and during the three performance.<sup>1</sup> Sørensen emphasized in an interview, that the collective set-up of the space was essential to develop characters, a consistent backup story and make sure that all actors knew each other's relational status and family trees (Burckhardt & Behrendt, 2008).

The budget of the installation was set at €70.000, whereas 65% accounted for the artistic side (i.e. salary of Sørensen and Köstler, stage design, construction etc.), 13% for transportation, 10% for scenery, 2% for costumes, 4% for catering to the audience and the actors during the installation, 3% administration fees and 1% for other costs (Köstler, 25.02.2014). The budget excluded accommodation costs and use of electrical and sanitary facilities. Moreover, Köstler (25.02.2014) estimates the actual total costs of the

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<sup>1</sup> The three performances lasted 36, 60 and 84 hours (Groot Nibbelink, 2012)

installation for *Schauspielhaus Köln* at €150.000, some of it financed through the allocation of unearned income from their own budget.

The installation has been acknowledged in the German theater scene, leading to an invitation to the *Berlin Theatertreffen*, the most prestigious theater event in the German speaking countries (Petrova, 2011). Hence, *The Ruby Town Oracle* has been presented for a second time in 2008 in Berlin, running for 192 consecutive hours with 40 (paid) actors, 22 houses and more than twice the budget (Petrova, 2011; Köstler, 25.02.2014). Interestingly, only after the *Rubytown* installations abroad, the Danish cultural funds recognized Signa's form of theater and eventually approved of their funding applications (Groot Nibbelink, 2009).<sup>iii</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

Signa's performance installations are clearly to be placed into the concept of environmental theater with an extreme degree of experimentation, unconventional spectator inclusion and blurred reality. At the same time, this type of unconventional theater makes the allocation of public funds and income difficult, as the installations are anything but main-stream and the taste within the broader public is not being developed yet. Nevertheless, through the *Rubytown* installations Signa received great acknowledgement within the theater world, leading to invitations to various prestigious European festivals (Petrova, 2011). In the long-run, the collaborations with theaters outside of Denmark, that do have and receive funds to experiment with new forms of theater might lead to a situation where on the one hand Signa is gaining more bargaining power over the budgets and on the other to greater (financial) acknowledgment by Danish policy makers.

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<sup>i</sup> Information on financial matters and related aspects has been obtained via personal communication with Arthur Köstler and is referred to as Köstler (25.02.2014).

<sup>ii</sup> Although Köstler and Sørensen design the budget draft themselves, they do not set salaries from themselves that are particularly high: “Since *Rubytown*, we did not raise our salary, which is € 3.500,- before tax per month (in Denmark, this is equivalent to the salary of a young nurse or bus driver).“ (25.02.2014)

<sup>iii</sup> Sørensen: „No matter how many good reviews we got, they wouldn’t give us a dime. They have something called a Theatre Law and it defines what is theatre, and what is not. They also have a law for Visual Arts. It is called the Art Law and it describes what an exhibition is: an exhibition is this, this and this... a theatre is this and that ... Only now they begin to recognize us, after the Theatertreffen. And there are some new people in the board. But before that they would reply: this is not theatre, it doesn’t fit. And this is very characteristic for Denmark.“ Groot Nibbelink, L. (2009).