

WHAT IS QUALITY? – Cultural notions of excellence

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What is quality of art for Young audiences? Does it differ from quality in general? What makes a performance a show of big quality? What aspects determine our concept of quality? How can we improve quality? How do presenters define quality? Is quality culturally determined? Is it regionally defined? How important are aesthetics and the prejudices often linked to them?

When Stanislavski was asked to make a distinction between theatre for children and theatre for adults, he replied that the only important difference is that for children, theatre should be better.

But what do we mean by "better"? This is the vexing question that has been asked for this session. And I don't pretend to have any answers, but I would like to introduce some questions and frames for our thinking that I think are important...

I want to start with two short images which will hopefully illustrate some of the difficulties.

An old woman sits by the fire, telling a story to children. They are mostly attentive, hanging on her every word and gesture. One of them has fallen asleep. Her voice changes with each character. She has been telling this story for years. When the ogre comes, the children in the story run away and we see their running through the jogging of her shoulders, while she remains seated. She sings a song, and the children respond in turn. She sings it again. The story is full of twists and turns, but certainly calculated to leave an imprint and without a doubt, to be didactic. It tells the children how to behave, but it makes them laugh as well. Afterwards, they remember almost every word. The children can tell it themselves.

Can this be called excellent theatre? Is it even theatre?

A theatre is darkened. A single pool of light illuminates a body, moving in perfectly articulated gestures. A voice in the darkness dictates to the body. The text is complex, dense and layered. The voice begins to sing – the music is very beautiful, but also strange and at times discordant. A child starts to cry, disturbing the attention of the audience. The audience shifts uncomfortably. They don't understand the references in the language. They are not sure how to respond to the music or what they are seeing. A critic afterwards proclaims the piece provocative and excellent. Some audience members who understand what efforts and technical accomplishments have gone into making this piece, agree. Others are frustrated, bored and alienated. They decide not to engage with theatre again.

Can this be called excellent theatre? Can excellence be excellent when it is not understood by those who are not "in the know"? Are these audience members philistines for not 'getting it'?

And if we were to take my first example, and place it in a proscenium theatre space – a totally alien environment for this form - we might think that this further underlines its inadequacies, its lack of excellence. But in fact in this case it is the theatre building itself, which is wrong, which is preventing us from experiencing the form in its totality and intimacy.

In a totally different context, an experiment was done in three countries, with students to identify excellence in teaching. The countries were Argentina, China and the UK. The aspects that had to be selected as most important to excellence were placed into different categories: physical characteristics, personal characteristics, attitudes and capacities. The results were very different from country to country. In China, physical characteristics such as age, social status, race and nationality were the highest determinants of excellence, while in Argentina, these factors had no bearing whatsoever on notions of excellence. In Argentina, the most important aspects were right attitude (hard work, persistence, honesty) and then a mix of personal characteristics and capacities. In the UK, personal characteristics were far more important than anything else – leadership and charisma were the concepts that best approached the notion of excellence in teaching. So we can see in this example, an intercultural study of perceptions of excellence at Coventry University, UK, that there is no global concept of excellence when it comes to teaching. Rather, perceptions are very much culturally sensitive and determined, and this has implications for students moving from one university to one in another country or culture...

Is this true of theatre as well?

I believe that if we were to do a similar study today, but were to choose theatre as our area of focus, we would find something very similar. If, instead of the above mentioned categories, we were to group our questions into areas such as: experimentation and innovation; craftsmanship and technique; timeless, universal truths; direct communication eliciting responses; narrative power; just as examples of priorities, we would find a range of very different priorities in this room, and we may find on analysis that that these are culturally determined. Whatever categories we chose to include in this question – what makes for excellence in theatre? - would be paramount to the answers we would get. Talking about excellence in the arts forces us to first of all define what we consider art to be, and who we are in relation to it. But in defining art, we include and we exclude certain notions of what can possibly be considered excellent. It seems that we define excellence first in relation to ourselves, and to our own ways of working, and these may be consciously or subconsciously culturally biased.

And who defines “excellence”? Is it the critics, the researchers, the artists themselves, the cultural policy makers, the educators, the funders, the audience? And if it is the critics, for example, who are these critics? Where do they come from? Whoever defines excellence in art also ultimately holds the power of interpretation, of censorship, of criticism, of what gets produced. If we allow a certain cultural grouping to define excellence, we are in danger of excluding, marginalising and alienating others and other forms of excellence. Generally excellence is determined in our various societies by the so-called experts. We hold these experts in high regard – after all they have studied the art form for years, they surely know what excellence is and how it is composed. We rely on their knowledge and expertise in judging our own work.

To develop these thoughts further, I’d like to explore some concepts of excellence in theatre, based on an Australian article by Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope called “Vocabularies of Excellence: rewording multicultural arts policies.”

In this research article, they critically examine a number of different notions of excellence:

1. **Excellence is the universal canon and is measured according to the standards of the ‘great artists’.** Excellence is defined as a timeless, transcendent aesthetic. In this case, the excellence is generally determined as such by a dominant culture, which is by its very nature literary, individualistic and defensive about what it considers to be culture. Of course we can see that this approach denies the richness and diversity of world cultures, and fails to be truly international...

2. **Excellence is the avant garde, the original, innovative.** Here there is a denial of the canon, of the great tradition. Therefore not only are traditional or canonical forms in trouble, but also community-based forms can never be truly excellent, since they are too derivative.
3. **Excellence is specific to a particular art-form and can only be judged relative to the standards and practices of the craft.** Technique and knowledge of the technique is vital in determining excellence. A non-expert is unlikely to be able to distinguish between the truly excellent and the merely competent. This of course implies that most of the audience cannot truly determine excellence, but rather need someone to guide them into what makes something “excellent”.
4. **Excellence is the expression of the national or ethnic best, the representation of the essence of national or ethnic identity and culture.** Here excellence is associated with particular traditions and cultural practices, and this tends to contradict the idea that art is universal. This approach devalues minority, or foreign cultures, tending to put more value on own culture. It is in antithesis to approaches which value diversity.
5. **Excellence cannot be made explicit– it is based on the originality and creativity of the individual artist, and can only be perceived practically and intuitively by this “artist”.** Here excellence is individually rather than communally produced, and cultures which value the collective would be at a disadvantage here.
6. **Excellence is above culture and politics and takes us out of the mundane and everyday into the spiritual and the realm of high art.** This of course again discriminates and limits art on the basis of content and on some subjects being more universal than others. If we applied this as a measure of excellence in South Africa, we would probably be left with very little of what would be considered to be great theatre.
7. **Excellence is determined by markets, sales and the size of audiences.** The commercial viability of a project directly correlates with its excellence. The problem with this view of excellence is the fact that audiences are seen as somehow static. They have been produced to consume a particular kind of product, and now they need to be fed. This view completely disregards potential audiences that could still be actively created for new kinds of work. However, on the other hand, it is the only concept of excellence as explored in this report, which takes the audience into consideration at all...

Of course these are not the only notions of excellence that could and should be explored. I don't believe that we can consider excellence to be a single or a concrete and static concept, but rather it needs to be understood as being intrinsically subjective, malleable, and context-dependent. Rather than one kind of excellence, there are in my opinion, many diverse excellences. I would like to think of excellence as a multi-sided polyhedron, which allows a number of different windows into valuing a piece of theatre. Excellence in one context may not be excellence in another.

For example, surely excellence should also be related to functionality and purpose. If a kettle doesn't make the water hot, however beautiful to look at, can it be called “excellent”? So the purpose of the art form and of the artist needs also to be taken into consideration... Is this purpose achieved? Is there a true communication with the audience? If not, then can we call this work excellent?

A piece of protest theatre in South Africa under apartheid, may have a simplistic structure, dialogue which is not particularly poetic or multi-layered, a repetition of particular themes – but the sheer energy and daring of this piece, created under conditions of oppression and danger, can make for excellent theatre where the audience is not only profoundly moved, but also moved to action... Would this same piece of theatre be excellent in today's conditions? Possibly not, although it has

been interesting that in the past year, we have had revivals of several of the great works of protest theatre, and all of them have been immensely successful with audiences. Perhaps this speaks more to the fact that the conditions of living for ordinary South Africans have not yet changed sufficiently.

To bring the discussion to South Africa then, I would like to do a very simplistic comparison of cultural notions of excellence in theatre as it may be described in my country. (You must understand that South Africa is a very complex country with 11 official languages, each with its own dominant culture, but with many more strongly identified cultural groupings, beside this, for example, South African Indians, both Hindus and Muslims; the San and Khoi peoples, who are the original people of South Africa, but whose languages are not amongst our official languages... These are just two examples.) So anything that I say here is going to be overly simplified.

If we summarise cultural notions of excellence on two polarities, some of the main features might be:

Western culture (English / Afrikaans)	African culture (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Sepedi, Tswana etc)
Theatre of importance to the individual	Theatre of importance to the community
Linear narratives	Ritualistic, repetitive, circular narratives
Virtuosity in performance skills acquired through extensive study	Virtuosity in performance skills passed down and developed within community
Performance is perfected in isolation and then transmitted to audience	Performance is perfected only through interaction and communication with audience
Evokes the intellectual, the symbolic	Evokes the spiritual, the ancestors
Focus on individual performances	Focus on ensemble performances
Requires and relies on the technology and concentration of the theatre space	Requires and relies on the freedom and inclusivity of the public space
Impact is personal, transforming the individual	Impact is social, transforming the society
Create original, innovative concepts, stories	Preserve traditional cultural heritage, stories.

These may be seen as some of the polarities that we might experience in people’s estimation of excellence if they were coming strictly from one or other side of this cultural divide. If we go to a theatre experience with one or other set of cultural expectations, as described, we might complain after a performance—“that wasn’t theatre” or “that wasn’t excellent theatre”. But it might be that it is our capacity to judge excellence that is not inclusive enough, rather than the work which is not excellent enough.

But perhaps another point to be made, is that identities are seldom simply singular. In a multilingual and multicultural democracy such as South Africa, identities are in fact many-layered and shifting. People embrace several, sometimes contradictory identities and move fluidly between these, and this allows for greater cultural mobility and inclusivity. Often the most exciting theatre makers in South Africa are those who are making work that bridge these two poles, or exist in the liminal states between them. This is in itself, in my view, a marker of excellence.

In the 2008 UK report from the Department of Culture, Media and Sports, called “Supporting Excellence in the Arts”: Brian McMaster says, “Excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual. An excellent cultural experience goes to the root of living.” I would agree with this as a basic principle, which speaks to excellence as being somehow transformative, except coming from my context, I would want to add the term “community”. “Excellence in culture occurs when an experience affects and changes an individual and/or a community...”

Now how does all of the above apply particularly to theatre for young audiences? If excellence is something that requires cultural or artistic knowledge and experience, in order to be judged, recognised or fully appreciated, then what does this say about the child audience where there is no previous experience or expert knowledge of the art form or of aesthetics? On the other hand, as theatre makers for young audiences we are often painfully aware of our own deficiencies. We suffer from a very particular area of lack of knowledge and experience in that we are no longer experts in childhood.

If excellence can be seen as culture-dependent, then what about the culture of childhood itself, which along with ethnic culture, community culture, linguistic culture, surely also has a role to play in defining what excellence is?

Sociologist Talcott Parsons has spoken about the fact that human infants do not possess culture at birth. New generations of children are in his terms a “recurrent barbarian invasion”...that need to be conditioned in order to fit into and contribute towards their society. While we may balk at this description, what he is describing is the fact that children go through a process of socialisation. At what point do children become sufficiently steeped in their own culture for us to be able to say that they are responding from a particular cultural paradigm? The processes of enculturation (the socialisation of children to the norms and values of their culture) and acculturation (the process of adopting cultural traits or social patterns of another group, and a restructuring or blending of cultures as a result) are ongoing throughout childhood and the teenage years. The processes are also both conscious and unconscious. Children’s play has been recognised as a major enculturative mechanism, through which children learn societal roles, norms and values. If this is the case, then theatre based on children’s play becomes another element of the enculturation process. This process is life-long, although many people may become more resistant to adaptation as they become older.

Surely the best way to ascertain excellence, particularly with the child audience is to focus on their response, their engagement, their interaction with the piece? But how do we measure or understand this effect or change, particularly when children are not able to articulate their experience for us? The Starcatchers final report describes two forms of engagement from very young children: absorbed engagement and interactive engagement, both of which can be observed and to some extent recorded. And what then about pieces where children may respond with great enthusiasm and joy, and yet the more experienced, expert eye feels that what we are watching is clichéd, hackneyed, predictable, or forgettable? Does this mean that despite the positive audience response, the piece should not be considered excellent?

My particular passion in my work in South Africa is exposing children who have never before experienced theatre to theatre for the first time. But this also raises many questions. For example, we have found that often the first fascination for the child experiencing theatre for the first time, is not the beauty of the images, or the delight of the surprises in the piece, or any of what we have considered important in the theatre-making. Often for this child, it is a fascination with the practical, the concrete elements of the experience – the darkness, the sound that comes from unexpected places, how something worked, what a prop was made out of (whether it was real or not) - and this has to be experienced first and negotiated before the more artistic or esoteric questions can be examined. So cultural experiences may need to be made familiar for audiences before they are able to truly engage with the fullness of the work created for them.

For this reason, performances that occur naturally within a child’s world as early as possible in their lives may be the best introduction to theatre. I believe that our recent experimentation with Magnet Theatre, who took pieces into township crèches to over 2000 children under the age of 4 was successful firstly because the event happened in the children’s familiar space ... the accessibility and

comfort of the space provided a framework for understanding this new cultural experience and it invited children to engage, rather than alienating them.

So to sum up and return to some of the ideas of Kalantzis and Cope, with which I concur: any notions of excellence have to be a construct, they should be open to containing opposites, to diversities of views and to the interactions of these views. They are culturally relative, allowing for multiple forms and sources of excellence. Excellence can be individually or communally created, but all notions of excellence have to take communication with the audience into consideration. If there is no communication, in my view, there is no excellence. Innovation should be seen as a constant dialogue between tradition and new possibilities, which are held in tension. Notions of excellence should be an on-going discussion between those on the margins and those in the centre. Excellence can be found by creating a cultural climate, which allows for all to participate, all to be represented and all to be inspired.

I'd like to finish off with a quote from Dame Liz Forgan's introduction to the report of the Arts Council England, "Achieving great art for everyone".

Everyone will have their own sense of what excellence is, but for us it is simply the bravest, most original, most innovative, most perfectly realised work of which people are capable – whether in the creation of art, its performance, its communication or its impact on audiences. It can be found in the classical canon or in wild anarchy, in elegant theatres or railway arches; it can be accessible or obscure, aimed at a tiny audience or millions. It can be costly or cheap to achieve, last half an hour or a hundred years. Be the work of an inspired teacher or a great diva, a radical outsider or an acclaimed genius. Work on a global scale or speak to a small community. It ticks no boxes but it is to be measured in its effect on both those who make it and those who experience it – and it is the opposite of the safe, routine and imitative...

But we are not in the business of 'anything goes'. There is a difference between the profound and the trivial, the visionary and the routine, the ground breaking and the repetitive. It is just getting harder and harder to be sure where the boundaries are if we are to keep our aesthetic faculties open to the unfamiliar and the puzzling. That, however, is the task for all of us."