

14

The Enchanted City: Holstebro Festive Week – an experiential and social cultural space

Kathrine Winkelhorn

Introduction

In 1989 Odin Teatret established the *Holstebro Festive Week* (Denmark), and did so by involving the entire city and its inhabitants. The Festive Week promptly became an on-going event, which takes place every three years in June. What characterises the *Holstebro Festive Week* in particular? And how has this event influenced the city and its citizens in the longer run? In other words, how can an event like the *Festive Week* contribute to enriching a city for more than just a week? When I interviewed the Mayor about the Festival and the theatre's role in the event, he said: "What the theatre brings us is popular and I think it is crucial that we get common experiences in which we can mirror ourselves – in the selfish society we are currently living in. In Holstebro we have become dependent on Odin Teatret, which makes us take part and which has become a common denominator for the entire city. It is a gift that we have Odin Theatret" (interview with the author, June 2011).¹

It is a rather unusual statement for a mayor to make that a theatre is a gift for a city and that it has become a 'common denominator'² for the city – and, what is more that the city has become dependent on the theatre.

In this chapter I will reveal and explore how Odin Teatret involves the entire city. I will try to give a clear answer as to why the Mayor described the theatre as a 'common denominator'. In my investigation of the theatre's approach to the *Festive Week* I use my personal experience and knowledge from my time as assistant manager at the theatre (1987-88). Most of my research has been carried out in the form of field studies conducted during the *Festival Weeks* in 2008 and 2011. During both festivals I spent one week in Holstebro and the surrounding villages watching and observing how the local audience responded to the activities. In addition I carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with representatives from Holstebro: the head of police, the

Deputy Mayor, the director of a travel agency, a librarian, a policeman, the Chairman of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the City Council, the head of city planning, the project leader from the Odin Theatre and a senior lecturer living in Holstebro and working at Aarhus University and finally the Mayor.

Odin Teatret and Holstebro

For the reader to understand the context in which I am writing, I will briefly introduce the theatre and the city. The theatre was founded in 1964 in Oslo, Norway and was invited in 1966 to move to Holstebro, with the offer of premises in a couple of old farm buildings. When Odin moved to Holstebro in 1966 the city wanted to attract academics. When they settled in Holstebro, the actors were all foreigners, with an Italian director, Eugenio Barba and three Norwegian actors. None of them spoke Danish. Later on more actors were included from Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, England, Italy, the USA and Sweden. During the first decades it was not easy for the theatre to be truly accepted in and by the city. The Odins, as they are often called, were perceived as strangers, who made odd theatre – often on stilts – and their performances, which do not have a linear narrative, were consequently perceived locally as bizarre.

Over the years, public acceptance has increased and for a number of years Odin Teatret has been a world famous theatre laboratory, characterised by a professional and scholarly milieu, including cross-disciplinary endeavours with a number of international collaborations. The core activity of the theatre is performances, solo performances, workshops, seminars and barbers and with these various activities the theatre is touring worldwide some 3-5 months a year. A number of books in several languages have been written about Odin and its practices³.

In 2011 Odin Teatret played 29 different performances in Danish, Spanish, French, English, Portuguese and Italian, in 16 countries.

Turnover:	€ 2,084,000
Own revenue:	€ 770,000
Grants:	€ 1,314,000
Number of performances played:	274 (108 of which abroad)
Number of students:	4,743, of whom 4,469 in 16 countries across the world
Number of guest performances:	28
Number of people on working visits:	216
Staff members:	30, including 9 actors from 8 different countries

Figure 14.1: Key figures, Odin Teatret in 2011 (in €)⁴

With the theatre group including different languages and nationalities, its cultural diversity has played a fundamental role in the theatre's artistic activities. To simply survive, the theatre had to develop and use alternative artistic strategies to those normally associated with a theatre. With an Italian director residing in Denmark, alienation and otherness have served as sources of artistic challenge and resistance to which solutions had to be found. As the ensemble does not speak the same mother tongue, language cannot be the dramatic engine of the performance. Necessity has forced the theatre to invent a theatrical expression independent of just one language, one that includes music, song, dance and voice. These particular circumstances have contributed to the richness of the theatre's activities in Denmark and abroad. Maybe that is why this relatively small theatre group can deliver such a variety of different activities, within many different political, social and cultural contexts.

A theatre group as a bridge builder

Holstebro is situated in the centre of a landscape of moorland, surrounded by ten smaller villages. Some 17,000 people live in the surrounding rural areas and villages, while the city and the surrounding area have 40,065 inhabitants (in January 2012). A large share of today's retail activity takes place online or in shopping malls that are predominantly located on the city's periphery, which in turn means that urban spaces are often abandoned. In that sense the city is no longer the daily meeting place for people, which means the city has lost some of its soul and identity. It is in this context that the theatre, through its different activities, has developed a role as a co-creator of the city's identity. The Chairman of the Holstebro City Council's Cultural Affairs Committee described the role of Odin Theatre as a bridge builder, which breaks down cultural barriers.

Commerce knows that we need cultural life. We have known that since the 1960s. One knows that the Odin Theatre is a rather strange theatre that we often meet walking on stilts. Now we have realised that these strange people generate something in the local community that is unique. Now we understand what it offers the city. ... Culture breaks down boundaries and this is what Odin Theatre does in its work. ... Without a good cultural life, we cannot survive here, including attracting settlers and academics. The strength is that during the *Festive Week* the theatre also encompasses the small villages like Ulfborg and Borbjerg Lighthouse in its activities. (interview with the author, June 2008)