

HETPALEIS – a continuous dialogue with its audience

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on HETPALEIS, a youth theatre and meeting place for children, youngsters and artists, where branding is more than a logo; it includes building a long-term relationship with your guests. Between 2001 and 2005, HETPALEIS conducted five visitor studies: two at the theatre, two online and one in collaboration with schools to reach grandparents taking care of their grandchildren. After 5 years the theatre wants to see if and how its audience changed and if and how the results of these studies influenced the way the house works with/for its audience?

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Dialogue

'It is in the dialogue between the one who "consumes" the art form and the artist, that the values and the sensibilities of the social culture are challenged and shaped. Being engaged in the arts may help us to gain a better understanding of the culture of a community. It shows us what we have in common and where we are different, what we like, what we don't like, what excites us and what leaves us indifferent and it thus enriches the way we see the world' as Peter Hewitt¹ puts it, explains how HETPALEIS sees its relationship with its audience. Key word is the dialogue, a conversation between two or more people or groups and the way this conversation influences the work in the theatre and vice versa. It is a continuous process involving everyone in and around the theatre.

Since HETPALEIS is a theatre for children and young people one could say that their focus group is well defined: consisting of the main group between 4 and 18 years old (with a good mix between school and non-school participants) and the group between 18 and 34 including the young people, teachers, parents and socio-cultural accompanists. The social dimension of HETPALEIS implies giving an as wide audience as possible the chance to participate to the activities of the theatre in house and on tour.

For season 2003-2004² this implied a total of 678 productions and played in the main auditorium or in de Serre (small auditorium), on tour in Flemish cultural centres and theatres, a location project in schools, projects such as the interactive education project 'De Tuin' ('the Garden': inviting children to use all their senses) or the theatre workshops for children and young people and the performances of the puppet theatre group in residence Froe Froe; reaching a total of 107.963 participants (see figures 1 and 2).

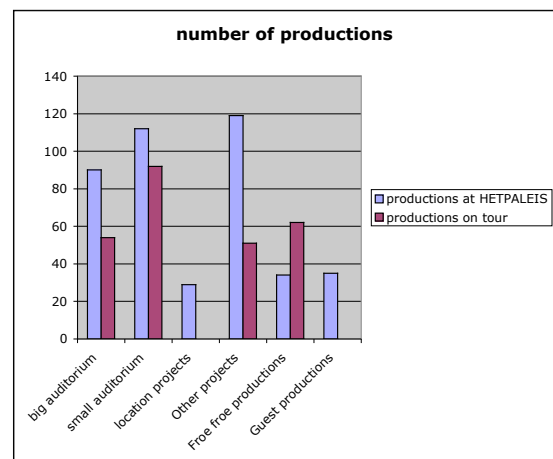


chart 1 productions 2003-2004

¹ Hewitt, Peter (2002) Beyond Boundaries, Arts Council of England.

² Numbers based on HETPALEIS, yearly report, 2004

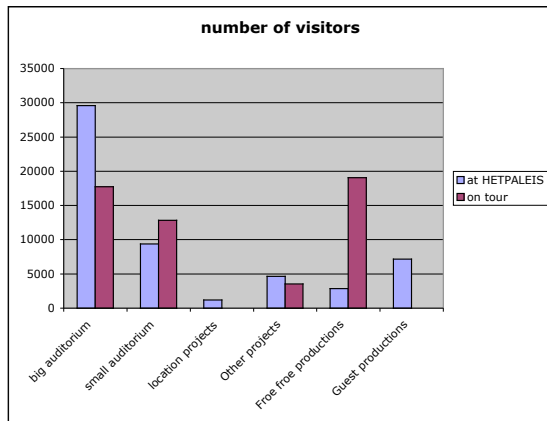


chart 2 audience 2003-2004

The range of people within and beside the defined age groups varies a lot and asks for specific approaches to get them in touch with HETPALEIS activities. So knowing its (potential) audience is vital when wanting to start the right dialogue.

HETPALEIS snapshot

The theatre exists for 60 years now and was formerly known as the KJT (Royal Youth Theatre), staging pieces especially designed for children and young people and part of the city of Antwerp. It was the place where a lot of people discovered theatre for a first time. In 1997 the institution became independent and changed its name to HETPALEIS. Since then the house developed a specific platform for youth theatre involving children, young people and artists in a multicultural city, trying to connect as well as possible with this city.

HETPALEIS is in the centre of Antwerp and part of Flanders. Flanders is, as you probably know one of the three communities in Belgium next to the French community in the south of the country and the German community in the East. Culture and Education are regional responsibilities and thus differ. Antwerp is with its 456.465 citizens the largest city of Flanders. It is located, 51°13'16"N and 4°24'01"E on the river Scheldt and covers a surface of 20.451 Ha. Antwerp consists of one central city and nine districts.

As the forth-biggest harbour of the world it welcomes a lot of nationalities. 83,40% of the citizens has the Belgian nationality, 13% kept the nationality of their home country³. The city hosts 172 different nationalities. 20% of the Antwerp citizens are under 18 and yearly

Antwerp welcomes about 1600⁴ newcomers of that age range. 58% of the children in primary school do not speak Dutch at home. 14% of the pupils in Antwerp live in a deprived family, the average of the Flemish community is 5,6%.

With this knowledge and in terms of the ongoing debate in Flanders on 'cultural participation' influenced by the minister of culture and wanting to give every citizen the chance to take part in culture⁵, HETPALEIS wanted to see how it could open up itself to a wider audience and give as many children and young people as possible the chance to enjoy theatre, how it could integrate the diversity of the city into the house and how they could get into a more 'interactive' debate with their existing audience? Knowing its audience is thus crucial to find answers to these questions.

An overall communication and marketing strategy on a long-term basis was worked out. Involving the promotion focussing on the name and the identity of the house based on the image of a dynamic and contemporary meeting point for children, young people and artists on the one hand, and a specific strategy per activity on the other. Since it is a long-term process, it is constantly evaluated and adapted where needed. So the house can act immediately on new trends or on social or cultural events taking place in/outside the house. In fact communication and marketing is more than informing the public about HETPALEIS activities, it is about creating a frame with extra content real and virtual linked with the house and matching with the interests of the (potential) audience.

The strategy is a joint effort of both the communication department at HETPALEIS and external partners; being a graphic designer, two photographers, a New Media specialist and an Arts Marketing specialist. Each has his specific part in the overall of the house with its (potential) audience.

Through visitor studies held on a regular bases between 2001 and 2005 – two at the theatre, two online and one on collaboration with schools to reach grandparents – HETPALEIS was able to

³ Figures based on 2004 *uitgerekend Antwerpen*, marketing & communication, city of Antwerp.

⁴ Figures based on the departement of Education and Youth of the city of Antwerp.

⁵ Anciaux, Bert *beleidsnota's cultuur en jeugd 2004-2009*

draw a picture of their (potential) audience and has now the opportunity to adapt the way of communicating where necessary.



Strategies and (potential) audiences

For HETPALEIS branding means more than strong graphical design and image; it means building a long-term relationship with your guests, which implies a welcoming atmosphere on all levels of communication with these guests. From the brochure with the programme, over the leaflet about a specific project and communication through the website, to the way visitors are helped when attending a performance at the theatre. It implies an open and ongoing dialogue with these visitors. Through visitor studies on – and offline the house tries to measure the way the audience feel about HETPALEIS. Suggestions made by the audience are integrated into the ongoing marketing strategy where possible. But not only the suggestions of the audience also the demographical parameters are continuously looked at and taken into account when and where applicable.

Thus the work with schools is a crucial part of HETPALEIS daily work, as is the work with teachers and teacher trainees because – with the KJT in mind – the younger one learns about art, the more chance there is one will return when one is older. What one does not know, one will not be able to choose as Julian Johnson puts it in his book on cultural choice *Who needs classical music?*⁶

To reach the newcomers and those that due to their situation would not be able to come to the theatre very specific projects where started such as the ambassador project, where a group ten people of very divers nationalities follow the projects at HETPALEIS throughout the year. They act as ambassadors for their community and can as such invite their friends to come and see a performance. Through regular discussions with the ambassadors

HETPALEIS tries to learn more about how they see the performed work and how access to the performances could be simplified. Another project in collaboration with the organisation Meters & Peters (godmothers & godfathers) wants to give newcomers the chance to learn Dutch in a creative way. Regularly on Wednesday afternoon they are invited to attend a performance. And the 'Friends of HETPALEIS' provide the means to pay for the entrance tickets of those who cannot afford it.



Since HETPALEIS has a young audience, the virtual aspect in the dialogue with their audience plays an important role. Recent mappings show that 40% of the Belgian Youngsters aged 15 to 17 surf seven days a week. This age group is also keen on using the hottest communication tools such as Instant Messaging, Chat, SMS, MMS Blogging and podcasting⁷.

So it was a challenge to open the debate with this group through a medium they acquainted with, the Internet.

Thus lots of efforts where made to develop the website into an interactive platform (<http://www.hetpaleis.be>) for information and debate on HETPALEIS activities and topics. First centred on an online forum, later on a global interactive web space full of information and activities linked with HETPALEIS and well balanced within the other elements of the communication mix: brochure, leaflet, e-zine. The mix involves the visitor in a constantly changing view on theatre. The brochure gives an overall view of the season and the more

⁶ Johnson, Julian, (2002) *Who needs classical music - cultural choice and musical value*, Oxford University Press.

⁷ Figures based on data from several Belgian Internet Mappings from Insites (<http://www.insites.be>) and Vloebergs, Erik (2005) *Mannen, Vrouwen en het Internet*, nieuwsflits n° 60, FOD.

society linked topics HETPALEIS wants to address, whereas the e-zine informs quickly about ongoing activities such as a première parties, chat sessions and new productions. Text-messaging introduces last minute actions and the 'virtual' platform makes room for an interactive dialogue and in-depth information about HETPALEISactivities.

The scheme worked instantly and the website became the 'virtual meeting place' of HETPALEIS.

In 2003-2004 the site was nominated for the World Summit Awards in the category e-culture, through which the jury wanted to illustrate that new technology trends not needed to be a barrier, but in fact could facilitate a swift, meaningful communication with the audience.

The virtual audience gradually grew since 2002 and is still developing, as one can read from the graphic below (chart 3) zooming in on the period between September 2001 and Octobre 2005. With approximately 250 visitors a day the online part of HETPALEIS plays an important role overall visitor figures of the house.

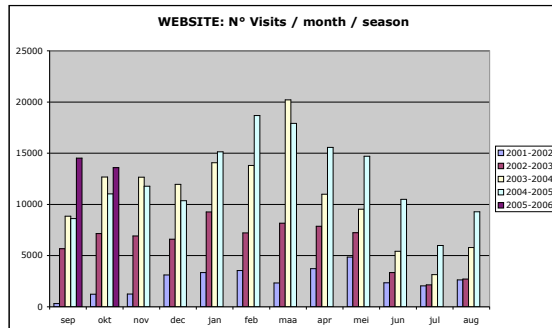


chart 3 Website visitors 2001-2005

What started as an online forum, has now become an integrated tool for information and interaction, involving pedagogical activities such as a weblog on De Tuin (an educational project at HETPALEIS) or webquests on productions for different age ranges, as well as weblogs on productions (showing the production process of a new show) and podcasts WOOORD and Marianne (online radioprogrammes). One of the weblogs on the production Daiss... resulted in a 'weblog ceremony' after the last performance of the piece and brought together the writers of the weblog (the actors and the director) and its 'virtual' visitors/participants. WOOORD, which has been downloaded more than 25000 times

since its start in May 2005, has been designed 'virtually' and will now go 'live' at the end of September in the auditorium, giving the 'virtual' listeners a chance to meet the characters. The link between 'virtual' and 'real' aspects is crucial to keep the dialogue going.

It is an ongoing challenge for HETPALEIS and its external partners to find the right balance between the 'real auditorium', 'printed communication tools' and the 'virtual platform', Virtual aspects are always linked back to activities in the theatre and therefore result in a stronger relationship with the audience as we can learn from the constantly increasing return visits to the website and from the visitor studies.

Provisional results of the visitor studies according to new audiences

Since the last visitor study is not yet completely finished we can only give some provisional results here. The final report will be available in January 2006. But certain elements can already be mentioned here.

Profile:

Thus we learn from the 5 visitor studies that HETPALEIS reaches its key audience (4 to 18 year old) as well as the second group accompanying the youngest theatregoers and including the young adults (19 to 45) with the focus on 14 and 24. In accordance with the recent big 'cultural participation'-survey conducted by Re-creatief Vlaanderen (a consortium of Flemish Universities) for the Flemish Ministry of Culture⁸, HETPALEIS has mostly female visitors.

Social atmosphere:

The social effect is very important. Most of the time the theatregoers come with friends or when younger with their parents. We also learn that it is a critical group that carefully chooses what it wants to see. The influence of friends on the choice for first-time visitors is crucial. But the online questionnaires also showed that the information and the ongoing discussions on the website might persuade a virtual visitor/ but non-goer to come and see a performance.

Companions:

Looking at companions accompanying children

⁸ Lievens John and Hans Waeghe (red.) (2005)
Cultuurparticipatie in Breedbeeld, De Boeck, Anwerp.

and young people there is certainly a potential audience that can be reached through socio-cultural organisations and youth/sports groups, since most of the questioned participants of the different visitor studies is member of a youth or sports group and about 16% of them is leading an age group within these organisations.

Another potential accompanying group are the grandparents; 51,8% of those questioned guards their grandchildren on Wednesday afternoon and do not have a specific activity cultural organisations focussing on seniors. Since it is the fastest growing group on Internet an interactive project online bringing grandparents and grandchildren together might reach a new audience group.

Television:

Another channel through which young people can be reached is television, according to other recent studies⁹ we notice that the visitor studies at HETPALEIS confirm the outcomes of other research on the matter, since most of the 14 to 24 years old divide their leisure time between popular music, sports, the youth group, going for a drink with peers and television. Working with TV-channels on a content basis, might thus make theatre more approachable for those who would otherwise not get in contact with the genre. This does not mean that it has to be 'commercial' or 'easy to grasp', because it can become an added value to these commercial or more popular shows presented.

We will soon be able to measure the results, since HETPALEIS is working on a major project for 2006 with a mixed consortium including KETNET (the youth channel of the Flemish Television). The "Wa is da!" – project will involve a series of programmes focussing on young people all over the world parallel running at the theatre, on television and online.

A critical and a virtual audience:

The visitor studies also show clearly that HETPALEIS has a critical and loyal 'virtual audience' that either looks for information, or takes actively part in the interactive parts of the website. About 12% never sets/or has set foot at HETPALEIS but visits the website

frequently. The two online questionnaires taught us that within these 12% each year actually some seem to come and see a performance and that thus the 'virtual audience' each year enlarges with new visitors.

Implementing suggestions:

The responders are positive about the way on – and offline communication tools are used, but they were critical in their suggestions for future use. Part of these suggestions are/will, when possible, be integrated in the communication and marketing strategy and so strengthen the relationship and the debate with the (potential) audience.

Food for thought

Thus some of the findings will be integrated in the ongoing dialogue between HETPALEIS and its audience. In some cases these might influence the way of working and thinking of the communication/education/artistic team, in other the audience might be invited to see things differently. This raises certain questions, worth asking when looking at the future:

- When gathered information from your audience, how do you use this information in the future 'dialogue' with this audience? Should one follow the taste of the audience, or should one try to enlarge the audiences view?
- Speaking of Audience Development and of the right of every citizen to enjoy culture: If the theatre as is the case for HETPALEIS is based in the centre of Antwerp, a multicultural city where more than 58% of the children does not speak Flemish at home, how does one approach these new citizens and how does one deal with 'our' and 'their' cultural history and heritage when approaching these new audiences with the theatres performances? And what is the influence on the theatres artistic work.

(Audience Development is an intrinsic part of HETPALEIS. A programme developed for schools as well as for specific audience groups is part of the

⁹ Geurtsen, Eline and Hans Plomp (2005) *Jongeren en Informatie*, CJP and the publication Smakers (2004) *Jongeren en cultuur*, Afdeling Jeugd en Sport en CJP.

institutions way of working in trying to formulate a possible answer to these questions: using topics that are known by all cultures working with ambassadors, representing the new citizens)

- Isn't it time for cultural institutions to take care of their virtual audience? If one notices that HETPALEIS has approximately 12% visitors that are basically linked in a virtual way, and if one reads from recent Flemish research results that 70% of the cultural visitors look for cultural information on the web, one could say that there is an audience there that asks for attention. Can Internet enlarge and strengthen the links with the real theatre?
- Should one oppose artistic genres defined as elitist or 'more complex understand' to popular cultural expressions e.g. TV-formats, Movies, Musical...?

- The relationship with press and media often concentrates on advertising, free tickets for readers/viewers/listeners or on contacts with journalists according to us there is a lot more potential in a collaboration that would enrich both parties. Why not work on joint projects between theatre and television?

(Some time ago we tried to beat the existing TV-formats that found their way to the stage, now we realise that it is better to join them, thus we are now working on a mayor project with KETNET (the youth channel in Flanders) based on an intercultural topic, which will take place next year. Both HETPALEIS and KETNET started to see each others work in a different way. We both hope that it will 'one way or another' enlarge young peoples taste for new cultures and new forms of artistic expression).

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