

This article discusses the methodology and outcomes of the *STEP City Study* on theatre in European cities. Its aim is not only to give a general overview of the outcomes of the comparison of the theatre systems of seven smaller cities, the supply of theatre and the use that it is made of it and the types of experiences theatre generates, but also to draw some general conclusions regarding the impact of the different theatre systems in these seven countries. Logically, in comparative research one focuses on the different outcomes of different systems and explanations behind them, though they cannot be but tentative, given the current state of the research. We discuss two distinctions specifically: between Eastern and Western European cities and between touring and residential theatre systems. However, the similarities between the outcomes of the theatre systems of these seven cities are also striking and should be acknowledged.

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**Keywords:**

theatre systems, theatre supply, experience of theatre, touring system, residential system, international comparative theatre survey, STEP

# STEPS in Understanding How Theatre Systems Influence Theatre Life

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In an effort to help build an understanding of how theatre functions in society and, second, to describe the relationship between these functions and the way theatre is organised, the STEP group embarked on an international comparative research project in seven smaller European countries.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the group aimed 1) to describe the theatre systems in these cities; 2) to analyse the supply of different theatre systems; 3) to map which people make use of what type of theatre; 4) to formulate what different types of theatre do to the people who consume them; 5) to question how their experiences can be connected to the way in which theatre is organised; and, finally, 6) to compare the answers to the above questions between the seven cities. In the preceding four articles, researchers from the STEP group have described and comparatively analysed (to the extent that the available empirical data permit this), respectively, the theatre systems of the different cities (with the theatre venues as the centre of each system), the types of performances they supply to the city, the use that is made of these performances in the city and the values that are realised by the spectators. As such, the research paints a comparative picture of theatre life in these countries, although it cannot be but a limited picture as issues such as the working conditions of theatre makers and the role of theatre critics in theatre life cannot be discussed based on this data set. Of course, the STEP group is interested in these issues, but for now the group has focused on comparing what type of theatre is offered and how audiences make use of it.

The aim of this concluding article is to provide an overview of how the organisation of theatre in a city influences the way it functions by discussing which hypotheses

The research for this article has been supported by the Municipality of Groningen, the Estonian Research Council (grant "Emergent Stories: Storytelling and Joint Sense Making in Narrative Environments"; PUT 192), Slovenian Research Agency (project No. P6-0376, Theatre and Transars Research programme) and Arts and Humanities Research Council, United Kingdom under the Cultural Value Project, grant no. AH/L01440/1.

1 In the opening article about the *STEP City Study* in this special issue the choice of cities in the research is discussed. The selection of cities allows for comparisons between touring and residential theatre systems and cities of (former) Eastern and Western Europe. With the exception of Tyneside, all of the cities are around 100,000 to 250,000 inhabitants and represent smaller countries in Europe, differing in size between approximately 1.3 million and 16 million inhabitants.

about the relationship between the organisation of the theatre system and about the outcomes of these systems can be formulated based on the empirical research presented in the previous articles. As stated in the introduction to this special issue of *Amfiteater*, we believe this data set to be unparalleled in theatre research because of its comprehensiveness and comparative nature. As a result, this first level of analysis does provide opportunities to formulate answers to the core questions of the STEP research group, though some of these answers warrant further research and, hence, are rather tentative. We first discuss some limitations to the data presented in this special issue. Then, the conclusions of each of the empirical articles in the special issue are reviewed and discussed comparatively (section 2) in order to draw out some general hypotheses concerning the relationship between the organisation of theatre systems and their outcomes (section 3). The article closes with a summary of issues which could be addressed based on a more thorough analysis of the data set available and presents some questions for further empirical research.

## Methodological limitations

Although the STEP group put a tremendous effort into devising a comparative research methodology, ultimately, it was not feasible for the group to provide a full comparison of all seven cities on each of the five questions, for not all of the necessary empirical data could be collected for all of the cities. Furthermore, while the article comparing the systems does provide a comprehensive description of each theatre system, the systems surrounding the theatre systems could not all be described to the level of detail needed. Most importantly, the description of the relationship of the theatre systems to the political systems needs to be elaborated. The political system produces decisions about the structure of theatre systems and – to varying extents – provides funding of theatre. As a result, the differences in the outcomes of the theatre systems cannot be causally linked to the organisation of the system only.

A second limitation is the result of the research methods used. While it was possible to compile a comprehensive picture of the theatre systems, the supply and the use of theatre in most of the seven cities, the research on the audience experiences, necessarily, relies on a small sample of the theatre supply in each city. Hence, the differences found here are related to both the differences in the types of the theatre performances whose audiences were researched and the differences of the theatre systems that produced these performances and audiences. Particularly here, the available data needs to be analysed more in-

depth. The value of the article on experiences of theatre lies in demonstrating how theatre experiences can be empirically researched and analysed in a comparative manner. The fact that the theatre values differ to a certain extent between cities is not very surprising, but the causes of these differences, for the moment, cannot be explained fully. A thorough presentation of the theatre aesthetics of the performances involved was outside the scope of this special issue, though the analysis has been done as part of the research methodology and has been used to explain some of the outcomes. However, a fuller exposé of the theatre aesthetics produced by these theatre systems would be interesting.

It seems the value of this special issue primarily resides in its presentation of the methods of analysing theatre systems and their outcomes and in its presentation of a comparable set of data from different theatre systems. As discussed in the opening article, a combination of quantitative and qualitative theatre sociological and performance study methods was used and proved successful in demonstrating differences in these outcomes, even allowing for some level of explanation of the differences.

## Differences between systems

We here summarise the most salient data and conclusions of each article, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the research findings. This is a necessary STEP towards concluding the special issue, as the presentation of the research in separate articles – which, of course, is necessary for detailed analyses – might obscure the common threads in the research outcomes.

### Theatre systems

The article on theatre systems demonstrates that taking the distribution domain, that is, the theatre venues, as the central point of the local theatre system, allows one to compare these systems. As a consequence, key differences in theatre organisation, such as the distinction between touring and residential systems, can be studied as different ways of organising the relationship between the areas of production, distribution and reception. Thus, widely differing systems can be compared. In general, the article demonstrates that, on an infrastructural level, the theatre systems are more similar than they are different. Their key features include:

- At the core of the system is a central “bourgeois” theatre institution, a city theatre or Stadttheater, which provides most of the performances in the system, with the exception of Bern. Such an institution usually includes one or more producing companies (residential system) with the exception of the touring systems of Groningen and Tyneside, which do not combine production and distribution in single institutions. Furthermore, these institutions differ greatly in size when considering their number of employees, from a handful to hundreds of employees. In the residential systems, theatre institutions tend to have a larger staff.
- Next to this central theatre, “other venues” are functioning in each city: in some cases commercial theatre venues usually with a large hall (Groningen, Bern and Tyneside) and smaller subsidised venues, usually including venues for experimental and amateur theatre. The size of this scene around the “other venues” may greatly differ per city. Bern’s abundant experimental scene and amateur scene disallow its city theatre to dominate the system to the same extent as in the other cities. In Debrecen the experimental scene is provided by semi-professional rather than professional companies.<sup>2</sup>
- Children’s theatre, including Puppet Theatre, is an important part of all the systems; however, in some cities it has its own venues and it is larger in terms of audience numbers than in others. Particularly, in Debrecen and Maribor, Puppet Theatre is very important.
- During recent decades, the forms of organisation of the reception area have been disappearing to the point where one can hardly speak of any form of organisation of this area. Theatre reception seems to have become a solitary activity; tickets are sold to individual audience members for individual performances, with the exception of the season ticket systems in Debrecen, Maribor and, to a lesser extent, Bern. This is a subject that warrants further research, as season ticket sales and individual ticket buying may provide theatre customers with different values.

This similarity of the systems is striking, given the different histories of the theatre systems in the countries of Western and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> But it should

<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to research how these organisational differences impact the status of the theatre venues for audiences. Also note that the definition of what constitutes amateur or semi-professional theatre differs per system as does its position within the system. While in some systems, for example, Groningen, the amateur scene is hardly relevant when studying the total supply of theatre available, in other cities the amateur scene cannot be disregarded (for example, Debrecen). We use the term here merely to differentiate between theatre provided by those who earn their living making and distributing it and theatre provided by people who earn their living elsewhere.

<sup>3</sup> The *STEP City Study* includes cities from both the former Western Europe and the Eastern (Soviet-dominated and Yugoslavia) bloc. The terms “east” and “west” refer to this division, although we cannot claim that the “western” cities are in any way representative of former Western Europe as no cities in Southern Europe are included, nor are the “eastern” cities representative of the former Eastern bloc.

be mentioned that it occurs as a result of the choice to take the distribution area as the centre of the systems. In other words, how audiences relate to the distribution area and to the production area<sup>4</sup> may not differ that much between cities.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned above, the relation between the production and distribution area is organised quite differently in each city. The most striking difference occurs for the central city theatres which provide most of the supply in almost all cities; whereas in Groningen and Tyneside there is a touring system, that is, a separation between the production and distribution areas, the other cities operate on a residential system, integrating production and distribution. Structurally, the scenes of the other (non-city) theatre venues in the cities resemble each other more, mixing features of the touring and residential systems. Furthermore, differences exist in the relationship of the theatre systems to their political environment, a huge area of investigation not fully integrated in this research project. As the levels of subsidy to the various parts of the theatre systems differ, they may produce very different outcomes in terms of market- or aesthetically-oriented theatre. Moreover, the organisation of the financial support differs. In some cases, subsidies are given to independent organisations based on expert advice on aesthetic matters (for example, to the experimental theatre organisations in Bern and Groningen), allowing for some form of aesthetic autonomy, though other criteria certainly are part of these evaluations as well. In other situations, usually for the city theatres (again in Bern and Groningen), the government itself runs the theatre, although officials employed may experience a high level of autonomy in aesthetic choices. Some subsidy systems avoid any type of aesthetic evaluation of art works but instead of that the assessment of the efficiency of a theatre institution is based on audience numbers and on the diversity of repertoire (as is the case in Tartu). A thorough exposé of differences between these systems is beyond the scope of this special issue because the main aim of the project was to investigate the interrelations among the production, distribution and reception areas that cannot be done without a certain comprehension of the theatre systems that produce these areas. In future research, the differences in the outcomes of the theatre systems in terms of types of theatre, their use and the values they generate could be related to the different relations with the political system.

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4 The terms are introduced in Figure 1 in the systems comparison article.

5 Furthermore, as mentioned in the systems comparison article, the relationship between the production and reception area (that is, between audiences and theatre producers) is impacted by the media. On a theoretical level there seems to be no difference between the various systems. However, the relationship to the media system has not been included in this research (see below).

## Supply of theatre

The research outcomes presented here indicate some patterns in theatre supply. These patterns are analysed in terms of the number and types of productions available to audiences in the city, the number of performances per type of production and the number of theatre visits to each type of theatre. There is a significant variety between cities in supply when the proportion of different types of productions is compared but not that much variety comes to the fore when the percentage of different types of performances is calculated. This means that the supply provided by different theatre institutions and systems varies more than actual consumption of theatre by spectators, since the number of performances per production relates to audience interests and theatre visits. For example, Spoken Theatre<sup>6</sup> is the largest category in the supply in all cities, but not to the same extent, ranging from 71% (Tartu) to 30% (Aarhus) of productions and 72% (Tartu) to 36% (Debrecen) of performances. In all the cities, the proportion of Dance performances is lower when compared to the percentage of productions as a result of the limited audience appeal of Dance. In all the cities (except Maribor) the proportion of performances of Musical Theatre is higher than the proportion of productions as this type of theatre is particularly popular among audiences. We hypothesise that the costs of production – which are substantial for this type of theatre – are (partly) recuperated through higher numbers of performances per production. Musical Theatre tends to be presented in the biggest halls in the city, allowing for more ticket sales. In the Western European cities, Musical Theatre also represents the bulk of the tickets sold, while it certainly is a smaller type in terms of supply in all cities than Spoken Theatre. It would appear that Musical Theatre is more commercially produced in the western cities.<sup>7</sup>

It should be remarked that the size of the cities (and countries) seems to correlate with the variety of types offered. An economic reasoning could be behind this, as larger cities provide an economic basis for a diverse art supply (cf. Van Maanen, *How to Study*). At the same time, smaller cities often have fewer leisure facilities available as the economic base for them is smaller. But more is at stake than city size. In the cities of Western Europe the variety of the supply of theatre is larger (both in touring and residential systems) because the diversity of arts has been an important cultural political aim. The democratisation and decentralisation of the theatre systems in the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s caused a breakdown

6 Spoken Theatre is the term chosen by the STEP group to denote theatre types which rely on the speech and movement of the body of actors. Since the term “drama” also has connotations of a genre and playwriting, we decided to avoid it.

7 Given the difference between the touring and residential systems, it is hard to investigate this issue for the distribution area. Moreover, from the perspective of audiences, the difference between commercially produced and subsidised theatre is irrelevant.

of the traditional structures and helped to raise a lot of new and small initiatives at the expense of the big subsidised institutions. Also the rise of market oriented theatre productions (mostly Musicals and *Kleinkunst*) from the 1980s onwards has influenced the variety of the supply.

Based on their analysis, Toome and Saro conclude that the following aspects influence the production, distribution and consumption of theatre the most:

- Cultural traditions influence the production and consumption of theatre, where the western cities provide a more diverse supply as a result of their longer exposure to diversification and renewal in theatrical traditions. Nevertheless, the heterogeneous supply of productions is not equally visible in the relative numbers of performances and visits. More traditional types and genres of theatre have wider audience appeal, both in the eastern and western cities. The dominance of Spoken Theatre in all the countries can be explained by the *habitus*<sup>8</sup> of audiences and by the familiarity of this type of theatre.
- The structure of the theatre system and its relation to policy, in which three issues stand out. 1) The presence of specific companies impacts supply and demand. This is most obvious for Puppet and Object Theatre. Also, when there is a resident company, the number of performances per production is higher, slanting the supply towards the particular genre and raising attendance. It seems that audiences develop a relationship with producers and actors located in the city. Alternative types are produced mostly by companies without a venue, lowering the number of performances per production and lowering possibilities to attract audiences. Smaller companies, therefore, have a hard time competing with the large institutions with spacious facilities. 2) The availability of venues for specific types has a similar impact. And, 3) the availability of educational facilities for theatre training in a country (which when publicly financed depends on decisions in the political system) enhances the supply of types, for example, the *Kleinkunst* academy in the Netherlands is a factor behind the strong presence of Cabaret.<sup>9</sup> But some types seem to flourish despite a lack of specific training facilities, such as Puppet Theatre in Debrecen and Maribor. Here the limited attention paid to the relations between the theatre system on the one hand and the size of the country, the economic and the political systems on the other hand in the research (so far) is particularly vexing.

<sup>8</sup> Following Bourdieu, a “habitus” can be understood as the whole of habits, inclinations and behavioural patterns or routines that are deeply embedded within a person.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the Netherlands boasts a particularly rich infrastructure for this type of theatre with four annual Cabaret festivals for new talent that award official prizes. In addition, the Association of Theatre Venues awards the Poelifinario Prize for the best production of the year and the Annie M.G. Schmidt Prize for the best cabaret song.

- Economic considerations: the costs of productions and size of auditoriums has impact on production and distribution in the sense that the productions of more expensive types of theatre are played more frequently and in larger halls. The “internal” economics of the touring and residential systems will be discussed below.

## Audiences

Again, the audience research conducted by the STEP group points to many similarities in the audiences for theatre in the varying systems, although some interesting differences occur as well.

First, it should be noted that the proportion of the population which makes use of professional theatre differs between cities. It is a surprising outcome that the smallest city where the audience research was conducted, Tartu, has the highest proportion of the population visiting theatre even though Tartu offers the least variety of different types of theatre: 21 to 33% of the Tartu population actually makes use of theatre, a figure which remains below or just above 10% in all other cities. This could reflect a difference in the theatre education or the cultural education of audiences, a difference in cultural traditions but, again, this could also be the result of economic laws, as these smaller cities might have fewer other (privately financed) leisure facilities available. The relationship of the theatre system to other leisure facilities (that is, the social life and economic systems indicated in Figure 1 in the systems comparison article) should be researched in more detail to come up with more valid explanations of the differences found. Indeed, residential systems lead to the longer runs and higher numbers of visitors per production and, in the case of Tartu, also to a proportionally larger audience.

Second, in none of the cities do the theatre audiences represent the general population, that is, the data suggests theatre tends to attract specific age groups, but not the same in each country. Audiences in Debrecen and Tartu are far younger than in Groningen and Tyneside. A stronger habitus of theatre going and educational traditions seem to be operative here.

Third, theatre audiences in general are highly educated, hardly a surprising outcome of the audience research, but there are differences between cities. In Tartu and Debrecen, theatre is able to attract considerably more people with lower education levels than in the Western European cities (31.9 and 32.7% compared to 22.2 % in Groningen and 27.2% in Tyneside). This might reflect a different tradition in theatre-going as theatre in Western Europe lost its general

audience during the phase of diversification of the theatre during the 1960s and 1970s, a phase which did not occur so prominently in the Eastern European countries. It might also reflect a different attitude of theatre makers towards their role in society, that is, a different balance between aesthetic and social values driving theatre-making and programming.<sup>10</sup>

And, fourth, the research indicates that Spoken Theatre is the most popular genre in all cities. This concurs with the finding in the article on theatre supply that this type comprises a large proportion of the theatre on offer. So supply in effect seems to drive demand.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, audiences for Spoken Theatre seem to be very loyal: the number of yearly visits to Spoken Theatre is higher than in other types.<sup>12</sup> But customer loyalty might not be the only factor here. In the eastern cities, Spoken Theatre is the type most accessible also to “light users”<sup>13</sup>, being the most familiar form from school lessons and earlier theatrical experiences (even from television). Also, in cities with larger supply of specific other types, such as Puppet-Object Theatre in Debrecen and Maribor and *Kleinkunst* in Groningen, this enhances the popularity of the genre. This also occurs the other way around for Groningen where Classical Dance and Opera are very small genres in the supply and audience interest.<sup>14</sup> Audience tastes indeed seem to be dependent on the supply available to them. However, programmers might also argue that the supply is geared towards audience tastes as it is not useful to programme for empty houses. Though they might see their job as arranging meetings between theatre makers and spectators first and foremost, programmers cannot ignore audience tastes completely because they are facing the risk of losing some audience groups. Here the subsidy system becomes important as well as the extent to which a financial loss on programming is allowed determines the abilities of programmers to effectively develop audience tastes. The STEP research here could be extended by reviewing differences in subsidy levels and interviewing programmers to take their habitus into account when analysing the differences presented in these articles.

10 The word “value” is used here in the sense of value regimes as presented in the value sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (*On Justification*), aesthetic values corresponding to their “inspirational polity” and social values to their “domestic” and “civic” polities.

11 Incidentally, demand also drives supply when subsidy levels are lower and insufficient for maintaining efficient performance and artistic freedom of theatre institutions.

12 As a result, the proportion of the population which makes use of Spoken Theatre is relatively lower than for other types. Ticket sales in general should be split in half to reflect the size of the audience for the type. For Spoken Theatre the number should be divided by at least 4 (see Table 8 in the article on theatre audiences).

13 That is, people visiting theatre only once or twice a year.

14 For the Netherlands this finding is particularly interesting. The country boasts rich educational facilities for Contemporary Dance, developed after World War II as a result of government decisions on educational facilities, attracting lots of students from all over the world and catering to dance companies globally. But apparently, this supply does not drive demand, as in Groningen, the audience interest is just as limited as in the other countries.

Finally, it should be admitted that the analysis of the types and genres of theatre on offer in the cities and the consumption of them is not able to embrace the nature of theatrical communication or programming in its complexity.

## Experiences of theatre

In general, audiences rate experiences of theatre performances high and are content with their professional level (they think performances are “impressive”, “skilful” and never “boring”). Audiences seem to recognise the professionalism of performers and value it. Such positive appraisals are logical given the fact that these audiences chose to go to the theatre, presumably because they like what is presented to them on stage. The theatrical dimension (forms and skills) is evaluated highest among all types of theatre but Dance has achieved the highest scores. Keywords associated with the emotional and cognitive dimension of theatre, such as “surprising”, “exciting” and “inspiring”, indicate the same difference: Dance is experienced as the most engaging type of theatre. Furthermore, the reception research not only indicates that Dance and Spoken Theatre are experienced as more emotional and cognitively engaging but also relatively more complicated and demanding when compared to Musical Theatre and *Kleinkunst*. The latter two types of theatre are experienced as the least complex, more entertaining and conventional than Spoken Theatre and Dance. As a result the experience of Music Theatre and *Kleinkunst* seems to correspond with their more commercial production and wider audience appeal but not on all aspects. Keywords such as “challenging” and “confrontational”, which can be expected to be linked to the more “artistic” genres<sup>15</sup>, score low for all types of theatre, with the exception of Dance in Tyneside (which indeed is experienced as “challenging”) and Spoken Theatre in Debrecen (which indeed is experienced as “confrontational”). Moreover, it is interesting that *Kleinkunst* seems to hold the most personal and societal relevance and not artistic types of theatre such as Spoken Theatre and Dance. However, we cannot conclude from these data that the majority of theatre audiences are looking for light entertainment rather than more artistic types: while Spoken Theatre is evaluated as the least relaxing, the analysis of the supply of theatre indicates Spoken Theatre and Dance comprise the majority in the supply of performances and visits in most of the cities.

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<sup>15</sup> This does not imply, though, that some Musicals, Cabaret performances or Stand-up Comedy acts cannot be challenging or confrontational. Frequently, the subject matter and the way this is handled in Cabaret and Stand-up is very offensive or off-putting and the comedy of these genres relies on such confrontational aspects. But these are part of the commercial allure of these genres to wider audiences (see also Edelman, Hansen and Van den Hoogen, forthcoming, chapter 3). This is an issue that could be studied in more detail: people can find these genres entertaining because they are offensive and confrontational.

It is also interesting to look at differences between the cities. On average, the differences between cities are not remarkable. The overall evaluation of performances seems to be a bit lower in Groningen and Tartu, a trend which can be explained by the presence of mediocre scores for Spoken Theatre in both cities and Dance in Groningen (see Table 3 in the article on experiences of theatre). It is difficult to ascertain the cause of this slight difference. Does it indicate that audiences are more critical towards Spoken Theatre and Dance in these cities and/or that the artistic level of the performances under investigation was not satisfying enough? However, there do not seem to be specific dimensions where Spoken Theatre and Dance score lower than other types in these cities (see Table 4 in the article). It is more likely that ratings on numerical scales such as used in this research have different meanings in different cultural contexts. As a result the researchers are hesitant to compare ratings on different dimensions between cities. Their analysis focuses on patterns in the evaluation of theatre types instead.

In general, all types of performances are considered more of societal relevance than being relevant on a personal level. Societal relevance is particularly related to Spoken Theatre and *Kleinkunst*, (except in Tyneside and Debrecen where Dance is also regarded as socially relevant), while personal relevance is mostly related to *Kleinkunst*. It is difficult to say whether the data reflect differences of the theatre aesthetics of the performances in the research sample (indeed an important factor) or whether it reflects national differences in theatre attitudes towards different types and genres.<sup>16</sup>

The article on experiences of theatre demonstrates that the same theatrical types, although produced and distributed in very different theatrical traditions, bring about the same type of experiences amongst their audiences (see Spoken Theatre and Dance compared to Musical and *Kleinkunst*). On the other hand, the reception research does indicate that in some cases, such as Opera in Debrecen and Tartu, Dance in Groningen and Spoken Theatre in Debrecen, the nature of the experiences seems to differ as the nature of the performances differs between cities. In other words, when theatre systems bring about different types of performances, in terms of theatre aesthetics, they also bring about different values for their customers. In the present volume it was impossible to fully include the analysis of theatre aesthetics. Both the qualitative and the quantitative reception data will be analysed more fully in further STEP publications.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that the differences might also result from translation issues of the questionnaire used where similar words might have different nuances in meaning.

## How theatre systems shape outcomes

The theatre systems in the *STEP City Study* represent some obvious differences which warrant further attention. In this section, we discuss the impact of the two most salient differences between the theatre systems of these seven cities as evidenced from the empirical material presented here. First, it will be discussed to what extent Western and Eastern European theatres differ in terms of system and outcomes. Second, we address the question as to which differences appear to exist between touring and residential systems, the most important “internal” difference of theatre systems.

### East versus west

Let us first conclude that the differences between the cities from the former Eastern bloc countries and the cities of Western Europe, are relatively small. Some data presented in this volume even suggest that this distinction is not particularly relevant, for example, the audience experience data suggest similarities between (former) Eastern and Western European cities, rather than differences. However, some interesting differences emerge between Eastern and Western European theatre systems. In the western cities the variety of the supply of theatre is larger both in touring (Groningen, Tyneside) and residential systems. In the systems comparison article, it was mentioned that this is the result of the diversification of theatre forms which occurred during the 1960s and 1970s in the west and only later in the east and as a result, the experimental scene in these cities is smaller than in the (former) Western European cities. In addition, it is obvious that some genres, most notably Cabaret and Folk Dance, are culturally specific. Audiences will have more familiarity with such culturally-specific genres. Whether these differences will remain, or whether somehow Western and Eastern European theatre systems will gravitate towards each other as a result of the forces of globalisation, is a matter for future research. But as was indicated in the supply article, the theatre scenes might change quite rapidly (see the recent spread of Stand-up Comedy in Tartu) and are also dependent on the artistic directors of big city theatres (as is the case in Debrecen). Furthermore, the *STEP City Study* focused on cities that are not representative of the total theatre supply in their country. It could be that a comparison of the cultural capitals would yield different results; the results here are considered to be representative of the theatre supply that the majority of populations will find in their vicinity.

The research outcomes indicate that in the eastern cities, audiences are younger (or in the case of Tartu: represent the general population of the city better) and less highly educated than in the western cities. It seems the eastern theatre systems have been able to retain a more general audience and in the case of Tartu the system is even able to service a substantial part of the population. Better traditions of theatre education (in kindergarten, in school and at home) seem to be operative. Apparently, in the eastern cities the educational system takes an active interest in theatre life and introduces children to theatre far more effectively than in the western cities (note: the Groningen audience – the oldest in the sample – actually presents the opposite picture to that of Debrecen, see Table 5 in the article on theatre audiences).

One last issue regarding the comparison between Eastern European and Western European theatre systems is the “fun factor”. The article on experiences of theatre provides opportunities to compare two Eastern and two Western European cities. The adjectives “funny” and “amusing/good fun” as applied to performances by spectators have been compared. It turns out that the first provides the clearest difference. In Tartu, the performances of all theatre types are generally not experienced as “funny” (all scores are below 3.5) nor are they considered to be “amusing” (scores are below 3.75); while Groningen and especially Tyneside score high on “funny” for all types of theatre. For “amusing”, Debrecen scores high on Dance and *Kleinkunst*. Spoken Theatre is experienced as most funny in Tyneside and Groningen. In Musical Theatre, Tyneside and Groningen also lead in both funny and amusing. These ratings indicate that the western audiences see their theatrical experiences as more funny and amusing in general, not only in the genres where one would expect this (*Kleinkunst* and Musicals), but also in Spoken Theatre. This indicates that these audiences are somehow programmed to think of theatre more in terms of fun than in eastern cities (especially Tartu). The importance of fun is also reflected in the article on theatre supply by two outcomes. First, Musical Theatre in Groningen mostly consists of the genres Musicals and Music Theatre, while in other cities, the type is mostly represented also by Opera and Operetta. Moreover, the category *Kleinkunst* in Groningen mostly consists of Cabaret. Second, Groningen presents the lowest proportion of the total theatre visits to Spoken Theatre; even though this is the largest type of theatre in terms of performances in the city (48% of performances attract only 29% of the theatre visits in the city). While Aarhus rates first in the proportion of visitors to Musical Theatre, Groningen is second and largest on *Kleinkunst* (which in this city is mostly Cabaret). Again, this indicates that the western audiences, especially those in Groningen, value fun as a factor in their theatre life to a far greater extent than is the case in eastern cities.

## Touring versus residential systems

The most obvious structural difference in the theatre systems researched is between touring and residential systems. Though all systems to some extent have repertoire and touring characteristics, there is a clear difference between Groningen and Tyneside on the one hand and all the other cities on the other. The empirical material presented here reflects a key difference between the touring and residential systems: the low “economic” exploitation of theatre productions in touring systems. In the cities with a touring system, productions are only performed on average 2 or 3 times (see Table 1 in the systems comparison article, Groningen’s average is 1.8), while in residential systems this average can go up to 5 or 6 performances per production (Aarhus, Maribor, Tartu and Debrecen, for example). Conversely, the touring systems have a higher variety of productions offered to audience, but that is only the case for the city theatres, not on the level of cities as a whole. Because of the very different size of the scenes represented by “other venues” (that is, non-city theatres), the total variety of theatre in a city is determined here. For example, Aarhus (residential system) eclipses Groningen (touring system) in the variety of productions supplied. As a result, the impact on customer loyalty is difficult to assess based on the data now available. In all systems the number of visitors per performance is around 200, only Maribor reports a considerably higher number, of around 250 (see Table 1 in the article on theatre supply). So, no clear difference between touring and residential systems can be reported.

## Questions for further research

The STEP project prompts some specific research questions for further investigation. Some of them can be addressed using the empirical material gathered for the *STEP City Study* and presented in these articles. Most notably, the article on experiences of theatre represents but a small portion of the empirical material gathered. The article merely uses the comparison of the aesthetic of theatre forms in each city to explain differences found in the experience of theatre. However, a more detailed analysis of these forms themselves could yield interesting material on the sort of theatre different systems produce. Furthermore, other questions can be levelled at the database which is the result of the reception research, specifically regarding the way particular types of theatre are experienced.

The STEP group set out to research smaller cities in small countries (with one exception), thus prompting questions about the relation between centre and periphery. This issue seems to occur on two levels: within countries and between countries. The data gathered does not allow us to draw conclusions about how theatre life in these smaller cities relates to theatre life in the cultural capitals of the countries, nor can it address issues of how the theatre (or cultural) systems of these smaller countries relate to those of larger cultural entities.

Globalisation seems to be a development influencing all of the theatre systems: the position of Musical Theatre, especially Musicals, appears to be comparable across the cities. It could be interesting to study to what extent local differences indeed do exist, that is, whether the choice of Musical Theatre repertoire, just like recorded music and film, is largely the same in these countries, and whether the types of experiences these genres yield are indeed also comparable. For now, we can only conclude that globalisation has not led to a total homogenisation of theatre as the systems are “coloured” by the existence of specific national/local genres: Cabaret in the Netherlands, Theatre Concerts in Denmark, Folk Dance in Hungary, the predominance of Spoken Theatre in Estonia, Puppet and Object Theatre in Maribor and Debrecen and a hefty “other venues scene” (most notably with experimental and amateur theatre) in Bern. Such genres and types may be the result of specific national cultural tastes or choices on the level of the structure of the national theatre system. How developments in genres relate to globalisation provides an interesting topic for further research.

Connected to this, further research might focus on the role of the media system in theatre. We have seen that the relationship between the production area and the reception area is largely mediated by the media, but we do not yet understand how this occurs and whether this differs between countries. The current comparison of theatre systems prompts this as an important issue for further research. The relation of the theatre system to other leisure facilities (that is, the social life and economic systems indicated in Figure 1 in the systems comparison article) was already identified as an important issue for further research, as this could provide further explanations for the differences in the use of theatre in cities.

The role of mediation necessitates new empirical research. So far, the distribution area has only been researched on the level of its outcomes: the types of theatrical events available to populations. However, some of the differences found indicate the role of people in the process of the distribution of theatre. Working methods and value orientations of the people making programming decisions are important factors, especially for the peculiarities in the theatre supply, and can shed light on the extent to which demand drives supply. So far, we have merely

found that supply drives demand, but undoubtedly the relationship can also be studied the other way around, necessitating a different level of analysis: the role of the programmer.

The reception area itself also provides new research topics. First, its “organisation” is interesting, as we have seen that collective ticket buying and season tickets are almost disappearing from the theatre systems, although in some cities these practices still occur. It would be interesting to know whether people who have bought season tickets have other value orientations and whether they realise different values in theatre-going, issues which could be addressed in further reception research using the methods described here. Second, the educational system seems to have a strong impact on the consumption and reception of theatre and because of that also the field of theatre education deserves special attention. Third, research could be extended to include those who do not make use of theatre. Why do they not value theatre and are there international differences in reasons for non-attendance, which could be linked back to the organisation of the theatre systems? And, fourth, it is interesting to see what values audiences relate to the experimental scene when it is part of the professional field or when amateurs or semi-professionals are mostly responsible for this part of the system, such as is the case in Debrecen. It could be interesting to research whether this has consequences for the social status of the experimental scene for audience members and the values they realise in using its theatre.

But most prominently, a further STEP in the research regards the relationship of the theatre system to the political system. As indicated above, it was not feasible to describe this relationship to the extent needed to analyse the different outcomes of theatre systems. Here, we can only tentatively address this issue. This relationship regards the level of subsidy to (parts of) the theatre systems, and the way in which subsidy allocations are decided upon<sup>17</sup> as well as decisions on the structure of the system itself and the training facilities available for specific types of theatre. We briefly indicate three issues here:

- Quite obviously, theatre systems with high levels of subsidy can be considered to allow for production and distribution of theatre with a limited audience appeal and theatre systems with lower levels of subsidy will probably produce more popular genres geared towards amusement, such as Musicals, Cabaret and Stand-up. However, matters are not that simple, as the habits of programmers and the position of theatre in the value system of audiences

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<sup>17</sup> These are the issues regarding this relationship that have been raised in the articles in this special issue. For a more concise analysis of the relationships between theatre systems and their surrounding systems, see Van Maanen (*How to Study art Worlds*) and Edelman, Hansen and Van den Hoogen, a forthcoming publication based on the collaboration in the STEP group.

might be an intervening variable here (see above). Furthermore, it should be noted that in some of the cities, Spoken Theatre appears to be more readily accessible to audiences and at the same time represents theatre as an institution of high culture. However, the most important problem lies in calculating the differences in subsidy levels. The calculations needed are difficult. The systems comparison article merely compares the extent to which venues are allowed to experience a loss on their programming (the key question when defining the distribution area as the core of the system). As a result, this can only be denoted as a matter for further, intricate, research, but the STEP data presented here does provide an important basis for such comparisons.

- The STEP cities represent some different options in the organisation of the relationship with the political system. In some cases, usually for city theatres, the producing and distributing institutions form a part of the city bureaucracy, its employees being civil servants and its budgets being part of the city budget. The other possibility is represented by private institutions with their own board of governors who apply for and are granted subsidies to finance their operations. In both types of relationships, it is very important to determine the freedom of the artistic personnel in aesthetic matters. Usually, the directors or managers of city theatres have some form of autonomy in aesthetic decisions, their actions being limited by two factors: their budget constraints and the extent to which politicians try to intervene in aesthetic matters based on considerations of public safety, health or decency, for instance. Furthermore, such officials may be autonomous in their day to day running of theatre institutions, but politics may be involved in the decisions appointing such personnel. In theory, the independent but publicly subsidised theatre institutions experience higher levels of autonomy, but this may not always be the case, certainly not when subsidies represent a high percentage of their income and are given out whimsically by politics.
- These two arguments are eclipsed by yet another feature of the relationship to the political system: the extent to which aesthetic values are allowed to dominate subsidy allocations. Frequently, in art worlds, independent subsidy advice by experts is important in subsidy allocations and/or in the evaluation of the performance of subsidised institutions. However, city governments also have other values in mind when subsidising. They might want to boost their city's image by investing in large scale facilities, or they aim to enhance the attractiveness of the city to businesses and to highly educated inhabitants by investing in facilities for specific genres.<sup>18</sup> It should be mentioned that it

<sup>18</sup> See Van den Hoogen (*Performing Arts and the City*) for an analysis of such values on city level in the Netherlands.

is not simply the extent to which such considerations “external” to theatre fields (or heteronomous in Bourdieu’s terms) are present in politics, it is also important to research to what extent the performance of subsidised institutions is evaluated based upon such external values. Furthermore, the requirements of New Public Management<sup>19</sup> can pressure theatre institutions to deliver other values, maybe even to specific parts of the audiences.

All these issues are outside of the scope of the current presentation of the *STEP City Study*. A thorough comparison of the relationship between the political systems and the local theatre systems in these cities could provide the basis for yet another special issue.

## Conclusion

Because of the extensiveness of the *STEP City Study*, it is difficult to present its outcomes briefly. The research ranges from structural analyses to audience and reception research, both quantitative and qualitative. The data set now available is interesting for theatre researchers with a variety of research interests. The sociological perspective of the STEP group focuses on the question how the organisation of theatre influences its functioning in society. It has been demonstrated that – though many similarities exist – the differently organised theatre systems indeed produce different outcomes, for example, differences between Eastern and Western European systems (in the eastern systems a smaller variety of types of theatre is supplied to broader audiences than in the western, and theatre is experienced as less funny); and between touring and residential systems (the former being less “economical” in terms of the use that is made of theatre, as fewer performances are presented in the city). At face value the conclusion that different systems generate different outcomes merely states the obvious. The value of the STEP research is that it provides not only an overview of the differences in outcomes but also the explanations behind them, although in some cases only tentatively, as more specific research is necessary. This is the next step for the STEP group but also an invitation to theatre researchers who may find something of their particular interest in the STEP work.

But focusing on the differences between theatre systems and their outcomes might obscure the fact that the systems are also very much the same and face the same challenges in the future, such as globalisation, mediatisation and an over-reliance on economic perspectives in political systems. Such common challenges

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Belfiore for an overview of how such government strategies impact art worlds and Van den Hoogen (“New local cultural”) for their importance in municipal cultural policy evaluation in the Netherlands.

prompt internationally coordinated research, of which the STEP group is but one example. We hope to have provided inspiration for further international comparative theatre research with this first presentation of our findings.

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