

1 ASSET Genesis and Aims

ASSET, which stands for Audience Segmentation System in European Theatres, is an international collaboration and research project of seven partners from across Europe supported by the Creative Europe programme in the period 2018 to 2021.

The main goal of ASSET was to develop, test and provide theatres and performing arts and cultural organisations in Europe with the tools and skills to learn about their audiences, using this knowledge to diversify and deepen the relationship with their audiences and develop their artistic programmes.

Team and Outreach

The ASSET project was initiated in the Czech Republic by the Department of Arts Management at the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, working with the Arts and Theatre Institute, a research, documentation and promotion organisation for Czech performing arts, music and other artistic disciplines and the organiser of Theatre Night in the Czech Republic.

The ASSET partners had previous experience of mutual collaboration within different European platforms in the past. The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in Finland and The Audience Agency in the United Kingdom, as the main authors of the project methodology, are members of ENCATC, the European network on cultural management and policy, while the

rest of the partners collaborate on international activities and audience development projects such as European Theatre Night.

ASSET was centred on European Theatre Night, a celebration of the arts involving a range of cultural organisations and taking place in several countries. Although the form, conditions, contents and communication of Theatre Night vary in the countries where it is organised, it is an international project and the European idea is integral to its concept. A large part of its vision is based on concepts of audience development and in taking innovative approaches to theatre presentation.

Thus, the ASSET project became a pilot project both to understand European theatre audiences, in order to improve the quality of engagement, and to enable dialogue between those organising these initiatives.

Four national coordinators of Theatre Night in the Czech Republic, Austria, Croatia and Bulgaria were among the ASSET project partners. Dubrava Cultural Centre, as a part of the People's University Dubrava, was involved in the project as the founder of European Theatre Night (see Chapter 8), first organised in Croatia in 2008 by this theatre, which is primarily focused on young audiences. The Arts and Theatre Institute, which was the coordinator of Theatre Night in the Czech Republic, was another partner at the heart of the ASSET project. Others were primarily chosen in regard to the continuity of Theatre Night in the given country but also to reflect geographic diversity and the wide range of entities that take part in this event in different European countries. IG Kultur, a non-profit NGO that coordinates Theatre Night in Austria, and Art Projects Foundation, a marketing and communication strategy organisation that coordinates Theatre Night in Bulgaria, were invited to join the project for these reasons.

The ASSET project also directly involved coordinators of Theatre Nights or similar projects, such as Finland's Night of Arts, as an annual event with a large number of activities that embrace the entire city, bringing different kinds of art closer to people or Poland's Day of Public Theatres. These projects then had the opportunity to exchange experience and know-how.

In order to bring together this extended partnership, a symposium, "Theatre Night in Europe and Audience Development Activities in Performing Arts", was held

in the frame of the ASSET project 2019¹, gathering delegates from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The symposium's main aims were information exchange, networking and the sharing of innovative approaches to working with theatre audiences. It also provided an opportunity to introduce the main ideas and planning for the ASSET project. Delegates also sought opportunities for synergy and closer cooperation in the upcoming annual European Theatre Night in order to have a greater impact on European audiences.

Twenty theatres from five European capitals – Helsinki, Prague, Sofia, Vienna and Zagreb – were essential ASSET project partners and collaborators: the Czech National Theatre, Studio DVA, Švanda Theatre and Jatka78; the Austrian Werk X-Petersplatz, Dschungel, Schubert Theater and brut Wien; the Finnish National Theatre, Zodiak, Circo and Alexander Theatre; the Croatian Children's Theatre Dubrava, Studio Smijeha, Gavella Drama Theatre and Zagreb Dance Centre; the Bulgarian Ivan Vazov National Theatre, Sofia Opera and Ballet, Aleko Konstantinov State Satirical Theatre and Azaryan Theatre, were all chosen as venues that wanted to strengthen, enrich and elaborate their audience knowledge and marketing or audience development plans.

Many of these participants regularly take part in Theatre Night and were chosen as a group of theatres representing a diversity of performing arts disciplines, such as text-based theatre, music theatre, dance, contemporary circus and multidisciplinary or experimental theatre. These included a variety of operational models, ranging from public (state or city) multi-ensemble theatres to independent non-profit organisations and commercial venues.

Audience research was implemented in these theatres, while further performing arts organisations from the five cities mentioned were invited to take part in ASSET workshops and training in the theory and practice of audience research and segmentation. Their selection took place in cooperation with project partners in the country and observed the rule of diversity of selected theatres in each city and of genre and organisational diversity.

¹ The symposium took place on 5–6 February 2019 in Zagreb, Croatia

The ASSET project concludes not only with this publication but also with an international conference, ‘Theatre Audiences: The Crucial ASSET’, which took place online in May 2021, and at which the project results were presented and discussed with a range of cultural and educational organisations directly involved in the project, as well as with other cultural operators and professionals, audience researchers, cultural policy experts and representatives of public administration.

The main project target group will be reached through the implementation of the delivered ASSET project results in the individual theatres that have been implementing new practices as a result of the research findings. In this way, the wider beneficiaries of the project are being reached, namely, the audiences of theatre and performing arts programmes.

Goals and Trajectory

The participating theatres had a range of experience of audience research. For some it was an opportunity to execute their first audience surveys, while for others it was an ‘eye-opener’ that confirmed their previous feelings or particular knowledge about their audiences and provided them with time and guidance to evaluate and deepen their understanding. Regardless of whether the participating theatres fell into the first or second category of experience mentioned above, most of the teams that took part in the ASSET project agreed that the time spent with their audiences during the research and the opportunity to view their work from the perspective of the public were meaningful parts of their project activities.

During this first phase, The Audience Agency undertook an audit of the theatres’ previous and ongoing research practices. This ensured that the research did not replicate what had already been done and formed the basis for some of the segmentation methodologies to come.

As part of this preparatory phase, there was training for theatres and cultural organisations in Prague, Vienna, Sofia, Helsinki and Zagreb in audience segmentation methodology and data collection. Following this, a research methodology was developed in conjunction with the project partners, with data collection taking place in the five European theatres.

The main methodology (see Chapter 2) developed was based on questionnaires of theatre attenders in the period of February–May 2019, during Theatre Night in November 2019 and also under difficult conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The ASSET project succeeded in producing useful findings about theatre audiences in Europe and also in creating a bespoke audience segmentation system, which is described in this publication. The project activities also provided international opportunities for networking, and the initial symposium and final conference became platforms for the dissemination of the outputs from the project. This publication also continues this work, aiming to provide guidance on methods and approaches not only for theatres and cultural organisations but also for university curricula and public cultural policies.

As with many other cultural and international projects in 2020–2021, ASSET was impacted by unexpected incidents: not just the COVID-19 pandemic but also an earthquake in Croatia, which completely destroyed one of the participating theatres. Nevertheless, planned activities were fulfilled with great effort and enthusiasm by all project partners. The particular phases are described in the chapters of this book, so the list below is just a brief overview to provide a general picture of the project trajectory.

Mapping existing data, ASSET methodology development

Before the main research began, a preparatory phase sought to understand what audience research was done regularly by the participating theatres. This audit of existing practices and of available data was needed to support the ASSET theatre audience segmentation methodology and to inform the creation of a segmentation model for the next stage of the project.

Workshops and training

In this stage there were workshops in each of the five countries, involving the lead partners as well as representatives from the theatres that were to take part in the project. In addition, there was also attendance from other theatres in the cities, ensuring that the learning was widely shared. These workshops had the dual purpose of training participants in the theory and practice of audience research and of consulting them on the factors that need to be considered for audience segmentation.

Data collection

Data collection took the form of a questionnaire for audiences during theatre operation in twenty theatres in five European cities (Prague, Vienna, Sofia, Zagreb, Helsinki) in two stages. During the first three months (spring 2019), the questionnaires were delivered using a face-to-face interview technique during the regular theatre programmes. This was repeated as far as possible in the spring of 2020, though research was curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In between, a shorter piece of research was undertaken during European Theatre Night (November 2019). Some supplementary research was undertaken in the autumn of 2020, but the number of participating theatres was limited. Nevertheless, a total of 11 155 valid responses were collected during the ASSET project.

Data evaluation

The data analysis had two stages. Stage one took place immediately after the end of the first data collection and focused on the analysis of theatre audiences in the examined theatres. The analysis of data and initial modelling was followed by the dissemination of results and recommendations for individual organisations based on their results. The second stage of analysis focused on the data collected during special events such as Theatre Night and before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and at various points afterwards whenever the situation allowed.

Implementation of data results

The implementation of the recommendations based on the results started shortly after the first stage of results had been completed and continued for the duration of the project. This involved online consultations with senior management staff of the participating theatres, project leader consultants and The Audience Agency.

Evaluation of data results implementation impact

The research results led to two main types of interpretation and consequent impact. First, all theatres were able to consider the implications for their own individual organisation. Second, a wider range of analysis and segmentation, existing at a city level as well as within a wider project frame, was made possible. The final segmentation framework is one that is common to all the project participants, providing the possibility for some benchmarking and comparison of findings.

In conclusion, we sincerely hope that this book stimulates the need and inspiration to use research to understand theatre audiences and to spark imagination and creativity based on evidence. At a more ambitious level, it can also start to point towards an appreciation of why theatre is important for society. All the ASSET project organisers and partners wish that the project outputs will become a crucial asset to the further revelation of the potential of theatre and of live arts in general. This is especially relevant as we emerge from our shared difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.