

Relaxed performance

Promoting creative wellbeing for all

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Prologue

Emanuel and Victor are on their way to the theatre when Emanuel exclaims: “We thought this was something that might be possible in the future, but now, now it is actually happening!”. Victor, equally excited, replies: “Yes, and I am really looking forward to it!”. Both Emanuel and Victor have disabilities that previously excluded them from attending the theatre. But this was in the past. Today, they are heading to a relaxed performance of the *Pussycats* at Hålogaland Teater (HT) in Tromsø, Norway. When they enter the theatre, the auditorium is bustling with noise and excitement. Some of the audience make high-pitched sounds, some rock back and forth in their chairs, while others look around in wonder, talk to their neighbours or greet old friends. As the performance is about to start, the artistic director steps onto the stage, warmly welcoming everyone. He reminds the audience that this is a “shush-free zone” and that they are free to move in and out of the theatre auditorium as they please. The announcement is met with enthusiastic applause, opening the show on a note of high energy.

In this performance, the audience is asked to act as the fan club of the band Pussycats, a rock band from Tromsø that gained international fame in the 1960s. And what a fan club they became! We, the researchers, are seated in the middle of a passionate “mob” of fans, bursting into rapturous applause and vocal support throughout the performance, both spontaneously and on cues from the actors. A few of the audience members, including us, are rather hesitant at first, as if questioning whether such displays are permissible. However, by the end of the show, virtually everyone is waving their hands, joyfully jumping up and down, jubilant at the success of the Pussycats. It is a communal celebration. After the performance, the atmosphere feels electric. The woman sitting next to us looks visibly touched. Wiping tears from her eyes she says: “I cannot believe that this is not common practice. I cannot believe that so many have been excluded from experiences like this. It is not right”. On our way out of the theatre, we speak to Emanuel and Victor again. They are overjoyed by the experience.

The relaxed performance has given them access to new experiences in their city, where they, as Victor says, “can be themselves”, without the fear of being “shushed at”.

Introduction: accessing creative wellbeing

The research vignette presented above is based on observations and interviews conducted as part of a research project integrated into the planning and delivery of the first relaxed performance initiative in Norway, at HT. Branded locally as RELÆXT, this initiative aims to make theatre more accessible. We, the authors of this chapter, a sociologist (Salamonsen), and a theatre scholar (Torrissen) were commissioned by HT, who sought a research-based approach to the development of RELÆXT. We planned and conducted research on the project in the period 2020–2023, in close cooperation with user representatives, health institutions, and employees from HT. The design can be categorised as participatory action research (et al., 1998). The knowledge gathered was brought back to the theatre between the performances and used to develop RELÆXT in accordance with the experiences and perspectives of the RELÆXT audience and HT employees. From the start, user involvement was a key part of the process, and one of the outcomes of the research project was the creation of a guideline that summed up what audiences could expect when attending a RELÆXT performance at HT (Benestad et al., 2023).

In the project period, we observed four RELÆXT performances and conducted 54 qualitative in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including members of the RELÆXT audience (children, adolescents, parents, and caretakers), representatives from user organisations and health institutions, and employees at HT. This chapter primarily focuses on interviews with the audience, most of whom we interviewed both before and after the RELÆXT experience. In total, we conducted 22 in-depth interviews, speaking with ten people living with disabilities, seventeen parents, four caretakers in health institutions, and two representatives of user organisations. In addition, we had informal conversations with many audience members on the day of RELÆXT performances. We also briefly refer to interviews with the actors at the end of this chapter. The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, study number 708386. All names of participants in this chapter are fictitious.

In this chapter, we place audience voices centre stage to assess the value of RELÆXT in terms of eudaimonia and creative wellbeing. Through a thematic analysis of interviews and observation data, we sought to understand how initiatives like RELÆXT might contribute to promoting eudaimonia which translates as: “happiness, prosperity, and flourishing” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 148). Our overall aim is to discuss and reflect on how access to theatre experiences, and the theatre experiences in themselves, can support human and community flourishing, moving us towards creative wellbeing for all.

Eudaimonia

Drawing on insights from Aristotle and philosophical eudaimonism, we argue that flourishing and wellbeing depend on individuals realising their truest and best selves (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Ruini and Ryff (2016) assert that “eudaimonia is meaningful living conditioned upon self-truth and personal responsibility. As such, it embodies the two great Greek imperatives, to ‘know thyself’ and to ‘become what you are’” (p. 154). In line with Vittersø, we also believe that experiences and activities promoting the “development of valuable individual potentials and social relations” are essential to a good life (2016, p. 19). According to Ryff (2019), art experiences and activities are particularly well suited to guide us towards self-realisation which has significant moral and relational implications. These experiences support us in the lifelong project of “knowing ourselves” and “becoming who we are”. Therefore, participating in activities and experiences that facilitate meaning, engagement, self-realisation, and growth is an essential part of a good and meaningful life. However, for some people, particularly those with disabilities, significant barriers hinder access to eudaimonic experiences. Before discussing how RELÆXT might contribute to eudaimonic and creative wellbeing, it is, therefore, important to contextualise RELÆXT in relation to relaxed performance internationally. Additionally, we must consider the barriers disabled audiences and their families often face in accessing the arts and cultural venues.

Relaxed performance and RELÆXT at HT

Relaxed performances are designed to make the theatre experience more accessible and enjoyable for audiences who might feel excluded due to strict theatre etiquette and other barriers. Notably, the UK has offered relaxed performance at several theatres since 2013, with this practice adopted more recently in other countries, including Canada and France (e.g., Dupagne, 2020; Hammouni et al., 2021; LaMarre, et al., 2021, Collins et al., 2023). It is important to acknowledge that two approaches to relaxed performance have coexisted from the beginning. The first approach, referred to as “non-inclusive Relaxed Performances”, primarily caters to a “target audience” identified as people who are neurodivergent or on the autism spectrum (Dupagne, 2020). Although mainstream audiences can attend these performances, they are not actively encouraged to do so. The second approach has been referred to as “inclusive Relaxed Performances”, and here theatres invite the target audience to performances open to all, ensuring individual needs are addressed, but disabled members are generally in a minority (Dupagne, 2020). The overall goal of both approaches is to secure human and cultural rights for everyone by making professional, high-quality theatre experiences accessible and enjoyable, with specific accommodations for audiences with

disabilities who might otherwise experience barriers to access. To achieve these goals in practice, theatres implement various measures to accommodate different disabilities, whether the physical adaptation for wheelchair users, adjustment of sound and lighting, provision of information before and during the performances and, most importantly, fostering a permissive, welcoming, and inclusive environment around the performances (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Kempe, 2015a, 2015b; Simpson, 2018). HT established RELÆXT as part of their long-term work to promote access and inclusion for disabled members of the community in 2020. RELÆXT is marketed as performances open to everyone seeking a more relaxed experience in the theatre, specifically catering to those who find traditional theatre etiquette oppressive. Currently, HT offers RELÆXT performances for all its in-house productions.

Rights and barriers

In Norway, people's rights to participate in cultural activities are safeguarded by the Norwegian Culture Act, *Kulturlova* (2007), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2008). Despite these legislative protections, individuals with disabilities have historically had limited opportunities to engage in cultural activities in Norway (Arnhøy, 2019; Molden et al., 2009; Rødekors, 2021). International studies conducted in Europe and Canada concerning the development of inclusive theatre practices reveal that individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum diagnoses, dementia, or other disabilities often feel excluded from theatre experiences (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Hammouni et al., 2021; Kempe, 2015a; Lamarre et al., 2021; Pasquier, 2015; Simpson, 2018). Many individuals report feeling excluded because their behaviour does not conform to accepted audience etiquette.

Theatre etiquette

Because live theatre performances depend on the embodied co-presence of audiences and actors, and the feedback loop between them is an important part of experiencing a performance, unpredictability and spontaneity are always to some degree an ingredient in live performances. This dynamic spontaneity has historically been a concern for authorities and theatres, leading to systematic "policing" of theatre audiences. The objective was to mould audiences into silent and compliant bodies to tightly regulate and control the interaction between the auditorium and the stage (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 39). This policing took the form of laws prohibiting unwanted behaviour and interactions, fines, and penalties for those breaking them and developments within the theatre, such as the introduction of darkened auditoriums at the end of the nineteenth century (Brockett & Hildy, 2010; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Simpson, 2018).

Another significant factor was the self-policing exercised by the audiences themselves. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson vividly captures this self-policing in the novel *The Fisher Girl* (1868). During Petra's first visit to the theatre, she defies nearly all the norms of theatre etiquette observed today. She becomes deeply involved in the theatre production, screaming aloud, falling to the floor, and even engaging in direct conversation with the actors. In response, the audience reacts fiercely, crying out "sit down" and "silence" in unison. This overwhelming reaction leaves Petra feeling distressed and unwelcome in the theatre. "A sea of angry threatening faces met her gaze, 'there's something wrong here', she thought, and she wanted to escape" (1868, p. 81; our translation). Petra's experience leads to introspection, and she is left feeling that it is something wrong with her. Despite fierce attempts to discipline audiences, it is, however, important to remember that theatre audiences have expressed themselves more freely than they do today until quite recently (Brockett & Hildy, 2010; Sedgman, 2018; Simpson, 2018).

Today, established theatre etiquette dictates that audiences should maintain silence and remain inconspicuous, refraining from talking or moving during the play, and only responding with applause or laughter at designated times (Pasquier, 2015; Simpson 2018). When these norms are violated, there are typically consequences. Audience members who disrupt theatre etiquette by speaking loudly or behaving "inappropriately" are often shushed, publicly admonished, or removed from the theatre (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Kempe, 2015; Pasquier, 2015; Simpson, 2018). A mother of an autistic child describes the challenge: "I don't think you can underestimate how excluding it can be to do things and just worry about people disapproving of your child" (Kempe and Gregson, 2019, p. 292). This sense of exclusion underscores why many individuals living with disabilities, along with their families, refrain from participating in cultural activities and avoid going to the theatre (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018; Hadley & McDonald, 2018; Kempe & Shah, 2015; Simpson, 2018; Unge funkskonshemmede, 2014). With our research, we assessed the situation in Tromsø to explore how the disabled community in this city had experienced going to the theatre both prior to and after the introduction of RELÆXT. Our overarching aim in this chapter is to explore and discuss what the provision of RELÆXT meant for the audience and how the experiences of attending the theatre can be understood in relation to its potential value for flourishing and happiness. This discussion not only encompasses the audience living with disabilities but also considers the broader impact on everyone involved in the theatrical experience.

The possible value of RELÆXT for eudaimonic wellbeing

All the participants we interviewed expressed support of RELÆXT. While two adolescents and their parents said that the initiative did not suit their

needs, particularly because the adolescents did not want to identify with the rest of the audience, the parents, nevertheless, welcomed the initiative as an important step in creating a more inclusive cultural environment. In our analysis, we identified three particularly strong narratives that highlight the value of RELÆXT for eudaimonic wellbeing. These narratives partially overlap but presenting them separately allows us to grasp the complex dynamics underscoring the significance of providing accessible theatre experiences where people can relax and freely express themselves.

Opportunities to express oneself: “We can be ourselves”

Many of the audiences we spoke with shared experiences where they or their children had felt that they were unable to be themselves or were judged for expressing themselves spontaneously, whether vocally or physically, during previous theatre visits. Karen, a mother we interviewed, recounted how she had learned to endure and ignore the scornful looks of disapproving audience members who often judged her for not controlling her son’s “unruly” behaviour. Nils, her son, has autism and cannot always regulate his behaviour, but he loves the theatre and often expresses his enjoyment and pleasure loudly during performances. Consequently, Karen had resigned herself to enduring shame and criticism as part of the experience if she was to give her son the opportunity to enjoy theatre, an activity that she knows he loves and cherishes.

Eli, another mother we interviewed, expressed that she never took her daughter Camilla to the theatre anymore because she felt overwhelmed by the multitude of “rules in relation to norms and expectations about how to behave, in everything from dress codes to when to be silent or not”. Eli explained that in her experience, these rules and expectations made it challenging and stressful for her to attend the theatre. According to Eli, the “theatre norm” is particularly exclusionary because it often leads to “shushes” and internalised stress for the parents. Eli shared that when she took her daughter to the theatre, she silently pleaded: “oh, please, be so kind as to behave yourself”. She did not want to draw attention or highlight what she calls the “difference that they represent”. For Eli, attending the theatre was associated with constant worry about potentially disturbing other audience members. Indeed, this was a concern expressed by everyone we interviewed.

Many of the parents and carers we interviewed explained that they avoided going to the theatre because individuals in their care often vocalised and expressed themselves in loud, enthusiastic, and excited ways. According to Siri, the head of a care institution in Tromsø, they had attempted to take the children to the theatre prior to RELÆXT because “we know that many of our children are very interested in theatre and love music”. However, each time they had to leave midway because the children laughed too loudly or

expressed themselves in unexpected ways. Reflecting on this she says: “It was a shame because, uh, it was really about the excitement being so great, that there was so much noise because they were so excited”.

With previous experiences of having to suppress excitement, joy, laughter, and other spontaneous responses to fit rigid theatre norms, most interviewees shared that it was such a relief to be part of RELÆXT. For many in the RELÆXT audience, the fact that they could be themselves without having to suppress their needs or moderate their behaviour was the most positive aspect of the RELÆXT experience. Victor explained: “The good thing about RELÆXT is that you can cry, laugh, tic. There are some people who have tics and various diagnoses, that they shout. [...] It’s good that you can be yourself, simply”. Many parents echoed similar sentiments, emphasising that not having to conform to the norms allowed them to relax and fully enjoy the theatre experience. As an example, Eli said that she “had a resting pulse the whole time”, exclaiming: “I didn’t let myself stress, normally I think a lot about appearance in a way, that you don’t want to stand out too much [...] But here I didn’t give a damn”. For her, this absence of stress made it a “totally, totally amazing experience”. Similarly, Peter, the father of a girl who sings most of her waking hours and who loves the theatre and music, said that RELÆXT had made a world of difference: “Going to the theatre is no longer a social experiment. Now I can really enjoy being there. I think we will visit all available RELÆXT performances in the future!”.

For families with disabled children, the logistics involved in exposing their child to a new experience often feel overwhelming. For Jo’s parents, it could feel so stressful that “it boils over in the end”. For many parents of neurodiverse children, RELÆXT makes the experience of going to the theatre easier to plan and follow through, even on a challenging day. One family described RELÆXT as a “gift packet” precisely because it made the experience more predictable and easier to navigate once there. Knowing that it is possible to leave the auditorium during the performance without fear of disturbing others is reassuring for parents, giving them the confidence to proceed with a theatre visit they might otherwise have avoided. Sara highlighted the significance of coming to the theatre, despite her daughter, Sofie, having a difficult day. Normally, they would have stayed at home, but because Sara had read about relaxed performances and their accommodations, she took the chance and went to the theatre. As they entered the theatre auditorium, they needed to leave almost immediately to get something to eat and use the toilet, but they were made to feel that this was entirely acceptable. Reflecting afterwards, Sara shared that the experience had been amazing, emphasising how welcomed they felt throughout their time in the theatre. Summing up the experience, she said that RELÆXT was like “having a four-wheel drive during wintertime”; it made it easier to manoeuvre the difficult road to a successful theatre visit for the family.

Opportunities to participate: “It means that you become part of society”

As we have seen, prior to RELÆXT, many audience members felt limited in their access to the theatre. For some, this meant complete exclusion. For others, the prospect of attending cultural events was associated with overwhelming stress. During our interviews with employees at a care institution for disabled children and adolescents, we learned about the profound sense of exclusion experienced by many in the disabled community. With many years working in this community, John’s first reaction was: “I don’t think you fully realize how high the threshold is”. For these caregivers, even the possibility of taking the children to the theatre was unimaginable. Laura, another employee added: “It’s actually the first time any of them have been to the theatre because with previous experiences and all, it has not been an option”. She emphasised that this inclusion of children and adolescents living with disabilities also extended to their parents and caregivers. This inclusive approach fostered a sense of belonging and positive change for them all as citizens of Tromsø.

Vivian, the mother of Heidi, shared that she used to take her daughter to the theatre when she was a small child. Vivian found it easier back then because of the assumption that young children generally make noise. Now, however, Heidi is an adult, and Vivian regretted that attending the theatre, which they both loved, was no longer an option for them and they had “not been able to attend theatre performances at all”. She explained that: “[Heidi] is the one who makes a bit of noise, who can be restless and who does not sit still”. With the introduction of RELÆXT, Vivian and Heidi regained the opportunity to participate, something that brought them both great joy and happiness: “We are very happy now to be able to attend, we have actually been to three performances. It’s been so great to see, because this is a setting that she [Heidi] really likes”. Reflecting on this, Vivian offered that RELÆXT had provided many with the opportunity to experience the “happiness” of being “allowed to participate in a theatre performance”. She found it deeply moving, noting “very many of [the audience] have not been allowed to participate in this type of cultural event before. And that means that you simply get to be part of society. So that means a lot”.

Lea and Kai, the parents of Jo, highlighted that the experience was particularly significant for Jo because he had the opportunity to meet many people from his school. They shared that this made a strong impression on him as he typically did not interact with his peers in social or cultural contexts outside school: “Our boy got a very positive experience by meeting the people he knew”. Reflecting on the event, the parents realised the importance of community for Jo and acknowledged that, unintentionally, they had shielded him from these experiences: “We protect ourselves, so we protect a person

who may need to have a [...] larger contact network. We protect him so much because he is not A4, so that he doesn't get the contact network he wants or needs". With the RELÆXT experience, Jo's parents came to realise how important feeling part of a community was for their son. Seeing and feeling a connection with other parents in the same situation was also an important experience for Lea and Kai. Likewise, Eli explained that RELÆXT provided a unique opportunity for people with similar experiences to come together: "The problem is that we who have children with different needs, we rarely or ever meet. There are no arenas for us to come together". For her, just "seeing each other, and knowing that there are more of us in the same situation", was an important step to build a community. Many of the people we spoke to also said that RELÆXT enabled families and carers to share positive experiences together, both within their families and residential communities. They noted that these experiences strengthened bonds among all participants.

All the parents and carers we interviewed described RELÆXT as an initiative that significantly enhanced the accessibility of the theatre. They consistently emphasised that RELÆXT provided people with disabilities and their families invaluable opportunities to experience the joys and beauty of live performances. In recognition of the impact of the initiative, HT received the Equality-award 2023 from a local disability organisation. The award recognised that by instituting various access arrangements and making accommodations, the theatre had made a significant difference in the lives of the disabled community in Tromsø: "The reason why we gave the Equality-award to RELÆXT was that this is the first time that it has been opened up to this special group [...]. Many can see that there is a need, but not everyone acts on it" (Rafaelsen, 2023).

Opportunities to experience positive emotions: "Theatre becomes so positive"

Observing the audiences at four RELÆXT performances, we witnessed first-hand how engaged and emotionally invested the audiences were. Lea and Kai told us that the RELÆXT experience drew Jo into the action on stage in a way that non-RELÆXT performances had not. They typically spent a lot of effort urging him to be quiet during regular performances. However, liberated from this pressure, Jo became so engrossed in the performance that he was genuinely upset when the curtain fell for the intermission, mistakenly thinking the show had ended. Similarly, Eli noted that Camilla, who has a short attention span, showed interest and enthusiasm for the action on stage, laughing and responding with alertness and joy: "She was drawn into it [...] she really managed to keep up with it [...] and thought they were funny too". Eli ascribed this to the stimulation of the visual spectacle on stage, something she identified as typical for the theatre: "that is theatre, right? Here it is big gestures, big emotions, colours, and speed". Seeing her daughter so alert and

engaged, Eli remarked: “She was really in her ace”. Similarly, the parents of Jo and Heidi saw their children thriving in response to the performance.

For Laura and her colleagues at the care institution in Tromsø, the opportunity to participate in RELÆXT provided a positive contrast to the seriousness of their everyday work caring for “seriously ill children and adolescents”. She explained: “we work with life and death all the time and the gravity of the situation lies heavy on us”. Laura, who knows the children well, says that they reacted wholeheartedly to the performance, responding nonverbally with “great joy and enthusiasm”. For her, experiencing theatre is “positively different” than watching TV or cinema for these children. Trying to capture what made the difference, she surmised that the reason was the liveness of the spectacle, the music and the captivating sound that engaged the children. Overall, Laura described that the experience was very positive for the children. She noted that this group rarely got the opportunity to attend live performances, so seeing how joyful the experience was for the children was significant for both the staff and the parents. Laura found it deeply moving to witness how enthusiastic the parents became upon learning that their children had participated in the show: “Finally, there is an offer for our children”. Significantly, the children themselves also shared their positive experiences with their parents after the show.

For many in the audience, the theatre experience became something that they talked about and reflected on for a long time afterwards. For Emanuel and Victor, these experiences became a catalyst for contemplating existential and moral themes. For instance, after watching *Panikk i kulissene* [Noises off], they engaged in deep discussions about how we should relate to and treat others. Similarly, for some families, the theatre provided an opportunity to discuss themes or characters from the performances. For others, it provided an opportunity to connect nonverbally. One child, who was unable to communicate verbally and was typically difficult to reach, hummed a song from the theatre for days afterward. The staff noted that the performance had made a positive impression on this child, offering her a way of communicating without words.

Observing RELÆXT, we noticed that this audience is livelier and more vocal than audiences at “ordinary” performances, engaging more openly with the action on stage. Indeed, the term “extra live” has also been suggested to describe relaxed performances (Thom, 2015). As the opening vignette shows, the audience at *Pussycats* transformed into a lively fan club, participating exuberant energy as co-creators of the performance. At the Christmas show, *Snøfall* [Snowfall], the relaxed performance audiences vocally expressed their disapproval of the villain’s evil behaviour, and the entry of Santa Clause’s sledge was accompanied by a collective, excited gasp from the auditorium. Afterwards, the audience members we spoke to describe this moment and the whole experience as magical. Families and carers emphasised that they found it “touching”, “amazing”, “nice”, and “fun” to see the engagement and happiness of the audience members so clearly expressed, especially since this was

a novel experience for most. As researchers, we were also deeply moved by the experience of taking part in RELÆXT performances. Experiencing and observing the joy these performances brought makes it the more disconcerting that people in the disabled community have been denied access to theatre for so long. Every time we heard Heidi or other members of the audience making joyful high-pitched and unselfconscious noises, we were reminded that if not for relaxed performances, these children would have been denied this experience. Like the woman sitting next to us at the performance of *Pussycats*, we likewise believe that this is outrageous: “it is not right”!

Opportunities to flourish: promoting creative wellbeing for all?

As we have seen from the experiences shared by the RELÆXT audiences, this initiative has profoundly enriched the lives of many who were previously excluded from the theatre. In the following, we argue that the initiative has impacted the audience members in at least three interrelated ways, all crucial to wellbeing: (1) enabling people to authentically be themselves and realise their full potential as human beings, (2) empowering citizenship and fostering participation in society, and (3) facilitating opportunities to experience positive emotions through theatre.

Within the framework of eudaimonic wellbeing, being allowed to authentically be ourselves and finding pathways to flourish as human beings is one of the most consequential aspects of wellbeing and happiness (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Vittersø underscores the importance of “development of valuable individual potentials and social relations” (2016, p. 19). Being denied the opportunity to express oneself in cultural settings and being excluded from cultural experiences based on our identities and modes of expression are significant obstacles to eudaimonic wellbeing. Such exclusion deprives us of opportunities to grow, self-discover, determine our preferences, and explore what makes us thrive. Providing a space like RELÆXT where audiences can be themselves without the fear of judgement or sanction creates opportunities for children and adolescents living with various disabilities and their families to learn more about themselves and discover ways of thriving as a path to a good life. As we have seen, RELÆXT has enabled Heidi, Anna, Camilla, Jo, Emanuel, and Victor to develop and realise their potential as human beings. They all love the theatre and through RELÆXT they have been able to nurture this passion.

Participation in society is an important aspect of what constitutes citizenship for all people (Morris, 2005; Wise, 2014). Families, carers, and representatives from user organisations perceived the ability to participate in RELÆXT as being “part of society”, and thus an expression of citizenship. According to UNESCO, there is a close link between cultural rights and cultural citizenship, which includes participation in the community: “Accessing

and enjoying culture is an important part of being a citizen, a member of a community and, more widely, a member of society” (Thomson et al., 2019, p. 177). Cultural citizenship and participation in society are important in and of itself, but being connected to a community, as active citizens, are is also closely connected to wellbeing and flourishing (Barber, 2009; Vittersø, 2016; Wise, 2014).

Participating in activities is often associated with positive affect, including a sense of belonging, positive relationships, and emotional connection (Barber, 2009; Gürgens, 2004; Vittersø, 2016). Like for other groups, people with disabilities depend on participating in communities to flourish. As Tollefsen argues, “a flourishing human life is necessarily communal in various aspects. It requires families, networks of friends, and cooperative social structures for the pursuit of goods” (2010, p. 215). This also relates to “aesthetic experience” that “will suffer in the absence of cooperation and the generation through time” (p. 215). For Tollefsen, “friendship, play, and aesthetic experience are real goods for the disabled” (p. 217) and pursuing these goods together with others is thus an important part of a good life. As we have seen, the parents of Nils, Jo, Heidi, Camilla, and Anna all say that attending the theatre is part of what constitutes a good and happy life for their children. In other words, providing cooperative social structures like RELÆXT can help create the conditions where wellbeing and flourishing are promoted.

Opportunities to experience positive emotions are important for wellbeing and growth (Fredrickson, 2004). According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, “uplifting emotional states are likely to broaden people’s awareness, enabling them to see the bigger picture, connect the dots, or otherwise transcend the self or the moment” (Fredrickson, 2016, p. 188). Moreover, Fredrickson suggests that these “expanded mindsets” help us see and understand the many ways in which we are connected to others (2016, p. 188). As we have seen, many in the RELÆXT audience expressed positive emotions at the theatre, including joy, enthusiasm, engagement, and interest. These emotions – interest, engagement, and enthusiasm – are directly linked to eudaimonic wellbeing (Vittersø, 2016) and flourishing (Kristjánsson, 2020). Experiencing these emotions is thus particularly conducive for promoting growth.

It can be argued that relaxed performances are more likely than ordinary performances to stimulate eudaimonic emotions because here the audience are permitted to respond freely and authentically. Returning to the opening narrative, the actors shared that the RELÆXT audience at *Pussycats* was the liveliest and most enthusiastic “fan club” they had experienced throughout the entire run. They added that this affected their own enthusiasm and energy, making their performance more rewarding and meaningful. In short, we argue that relaxing theatre etiquette, for both disabled and nondisabled audiences, enables greater opportunities for co-creation and immersion. Speaking for ourselves, after initially feeling inhibition, it was fulfilling to co-create,

engage collectively and communally, and play along unselfconsciously. We can also confirm Fredrickson's claim that in this "uplifting emotional state", we transcend ourselves and feel a greater connection with both fellow theatregoers and actors. This insight was shared by many of the parents and by the scholar Hannah Simpson (2018), who argues that "tics in the theatre" and the presence of neurodivergent spectator's "offer a new perspective on the value of theatre as a live, embodied, collective event that permits felt communion with other individuals – spectators as well as performers" (p. 233). Experiencing these feelings, becoming immersed, and engaging in imaginative play should not be dismissed as mere amusement. Indeed, as Nussbaum argues, a life in dignity involves being able to develop our capabilities to sense, feel, use our imagination, and play. Significantly, she argues that "what play and the free expansion of the imaginative capacities contribute to a human life is not merely instrumental but partly constitutive of a worthwhile human life" (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 36). In essence, exploring and developing our imaginative abilities through play and free expression is integral to being well.

Concluding remarks

People with disabilities, along with their families and carers, have equal rights to access cultural venues and experiences as the general population. However, the continued exclusion of many individuals from the theatre and other cultural activities in Norway (and indeed, globally) underscores the disparity between statutory rights guaranteeing cultural participation for all and the actual opportunities accessible to disabled audiences. Addressing this gap is urgently needed for several reasons: to ensure cultural rights, promote human rights and social justice, and guarantee that the entire population can access the wellbeing benefits of live theatre.

It is important to acknowledge that RELÆXT is not for all, and that a minority said that they rather would attend regular performances in the future. For the majority, however, the RELÆXT initiative at HT has successfully provided a platform for people to thrive, flourish, and cultivate their interests and sense of identity. Moreover, RELÆXT fostered personal development in terms of self-expression, imagination, creativity, and social interaction, all essential for achieving flourishing, happy lives. Based on the material we collected, we cannot definitively conclude that the experiences resulted in transformative and significant mindset shifts. We can assert, nevertheless, that RELÆXT provided disabled audiences and their families with opportunities to share powerful positive and eudaimonic emotions such as enthusiasm, interest, wonder, and joy with others. These emotions are crucial for personal growth, prompting us to speculate that when Camilla "is in her ace" and Jo enthusiastically interacts with the action on stage among his peers beyond school, they may undergo significance shifts in how they perceive themselves and their place in

the world, both in relation to family, friends, and their broader community. We can also speculate that the deep resonance experienced by many, including parents, carers, actors, other staff at HT and researchers during RELÆXT performances, was due to the “extra-liveness” that enhances eudaimonic feelings and fosters a profound sense of unity and belonging, which are crucial for wellbeing. Perhaps, it also resonates with unconscious and primordial feelings that live performances represent collective celebrations of ritual significance, experiences from which no one should be excluded.

A central message of this chapter underscores the importance of prioritising efforts to facilitate meaningful engagement, self-realisation, and growth for disabled members of the community who have historically been marginalised and excluded. Establishing policy frameworks to guide such accommodations and inclusivity not only enhances cultural participation but also promotes a more equitable society. As demonstrated in this chapter, the implementation of relaxed performances serves as a proactive measure to ensure broader access to cultural life. This represents a significant step towards fostering creative wellbeing for all.

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