

When we ask about your body...

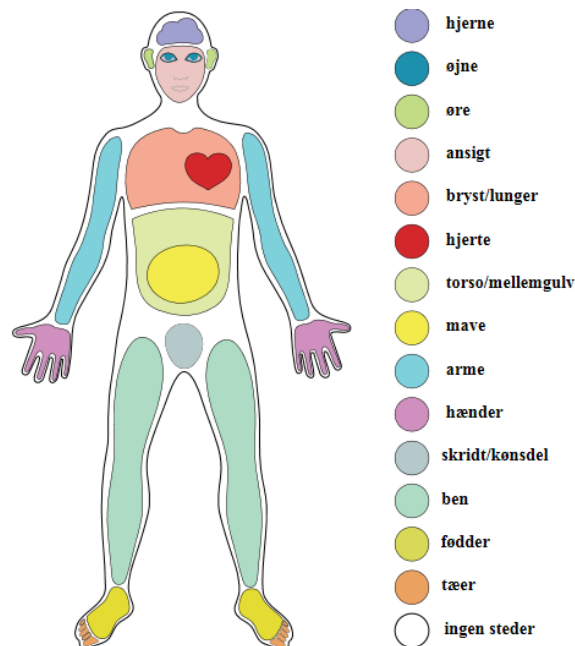


Illustration: Brian Hartley

By Nina Gram & Matthew Reason

In this study, A Suitcase of Methods have explored the influence of specific questions. How does a specific question affect audiences' responses about experiences with performance art? What happens if we ask audiences to take themselves and their bodies as point of departure and answer the question: *"Where in your body would you place your experience with the production?"*

Methodological setup

Inspired by and in collaboration with [Matthew Reason](#), Professor of Theatre and Performance, York St John University, we carried out an experiment which Matthew Reason have tried before on four different dance productions. After experiencing a performance, the audience received an email with a link to a very brief online survey. Here the audience were presented with an illustration of a body seen here, and they were asked to locate their experience in their own body and click on the same body part in the survey. Hereafter they had the opportunity to elaborate on their choice in a text box.

What did we do?

We wanted to try this setup in a Danish context.

After three productions at The Royal Danish Theatre (*Terror* (a play), *Jewels* (a ballet), and *The Journey to Reims* (an opera)), we sent out the 'Where in your body'-survey to half of the ticket purchasers. Our aim was to explore where in our bodies experiences with performance art are located and how we describe these experiences when our bodies are our first and primary reference point.

We also wanted to try the question across different art forms in order to explore whether for instance an opera seems to cause different bodily reactions than a ballet etc.

Furthermore, we wanted to compare our results with data from another online questionnaire investigating the experiences of the same productions. The other half of the ticket purchasers, who didn't get a 'Where in your body'-email, received a traditional questionnaire for audience evaluation asking them to rate how likely they would be to recommend the production and their overall theatre experience to others. This group was also invited to write down any additional comments "We want to hear your criticism and your suggestions, so that we can improve the overall experience with The Royal Danish Theatre", it says in the survey.

The numbers

The 'Where in your body'-survey was sent out to a total of 4,405 ticket purchasers. We received 1,297 answers (30%).

The answers distributed on the productions look like this:

- *Jewels*: 2,075 sent out / 589 answers (28%)
- *Terror*: 719 sent out / 227 answers (32%)

- *The Journey to Reims*: 1,611 sent out / 481 answers (30%).ⁱ

Procedure of the analysisⁱⁱ

The analysis of *Where in your body* is done as a combination of quantitative methods, when working on the distribution of the different body parts chosen by the ticket purchasers, (you can see the results of this in the result pages at the end of this report) and a qualitative approach when studying the written comments.

This survey generated a great amount of data, which challenges traditional qualitative methods for analysis. Nevertheless, we wanted to get a feel of the tendencies in the comments, and we thus carried out the analysis of the comments in these steps:

- 1) We did a read through of all the comments to get an overall feeling of the tendencies and wrote down our immediate impressions. After doing this with all three productions, we wrote down our impression of differences and similarities across the three productions and art forms.
- 2) We grouped the comments according to the chosen body parts and read the material again focusing on both common answers within each body part and on surprising and unusual answers.
- 3) In addition, we read the comments from the same three productions that came in from the traditional online survey. We thus compared these comments with the comments from the 'Where in your body'-survey to explore what the question means for the way we think about and describe our experience with performance art.

- 4) Finally, we coded the content of the comments using NVivo as we do with the traditional surveys carried out at The Royal Danish Theatre. Usually we read every comment and attach *as many keywords* as relevant to the comment. In this study, we connected each comment to only *one keyword*, as it seemed that most of the comments had one primary message. This simplification gave us a bit of clarity of the themes that arose from the material, but it also disregarded the more subtle details in the comments that could also be relevant for an analysis.

About the productions

Terror takes place in a courtroom. The audience are the jury, and they are presented with a complex case: A pilot from the special forces is accused of killing 150 innocent people. Against orders, he shoots down an aircraft that has been hijacked, sending 150 passengers to their deaths. The terrorists in this aircraft were aiming for the national soccer stadium where 38,000 spectators are attending a match. Now it is up to the jury / audience to decide whether the pilot should be acquitted or convicted. The verdict establishes the outcome of the trial, the pilot's fate, and the play's ending.



Foto: Emilia Therese

Terror is written by German writer and lawyer Ferdinand von Schirach, grandson of the convicted Hitler Youth leader Baldur von Schirach. In the German-speaking world, the play has been a very popular conversation piece.



Foto: Thomas Petri

Rossini's opera, *The Journey to Reims*, is not known for its strong plot, but for its comedy, its large ensemble of singers, and an orchestra ready to take on Rossini's lively music. This version of *The Journey to Reims* takes place in the present at an extravagant art gallery. Gallery owner Madame Cortese and her staff are trying to get the gallery ready for the opening of a grand exhibition. However, nothing is ready, and the curating process is obstructed as figures from the paintings step out of their frames to interact with staff and visitors, wandering around the gallery. The comedy of Rossini's opera is in this production supported by amusing art historical references.

Emeralds, rubies and diamonds are combined in the ballet, *Jewels*. In three sparkling movements choreographer George Balanchine tells the story of classical ballet.

The green *Emeralds* is a tribute to the Romantic French ballet of the 1800. A sophisticated and dreamlike dance at a hypnotic tempo that almost evokes an underwater setting. In contrast, the red *Rubies* shows sharp, humorous dance steps and kitschy, jazz-like music featuring elements of the rumba and samba, raising the pulse of both the audience and the dancers.



Foto: Klaus Vedfelt

Finally, the white *Diamonds*, a large-scale virtuoso finale, is a tribute to the golden age of the imperial Russian ballet and the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, where Balanchine spent his formative years.

What did we learn?

When looking at the chosen body parts from *Terror*, one specific result stands out.ⁱⁱⁱ A very large majority chose BRAINS (75%). The HEART came in as a distant second with only 9%. In order to understand why people chose BRAINS, we have to look into some of the comments left in this category:

Two tendencies seem to be dominant:

- 1) The first and by far most prevailing reason for choosing BRAINS is the result of the topic and atmosphere of the production (see the description of *Terror* above). The play revolves around a complex ethical,

moral, and legal dilemma, and the audience is specifically asked to choose sides and decide if the defendant is guilty. Many of the audience describe how dealing with this dilemma required brain activity.

BRAINS: Because I had to relate to complex ethical dilemmas. I usually, with productions from The Royal Danish Theatre, wouldn't answer BRAINS, but yesterday the brain was dominant. The play required a detailed understanding of the law, structures in our society, and ethics. You couldn't just sit back and relax.

BRAINS: I was challenged. I was forced to reflect on an issue I haven't thought about before.

- 2) A second tendency is that many audiences have difficulties choosing only one body part, and some of the people choosing BRAINS also wanted to click on a second body part:

BRAINS: Terror activates feelings we usually ascribe to heart and gut, but it also asks us to think and reflect. Therefore, I end up choosing BRAINS.

BRAINS: If I had the possibility of choosing two body parts I would also have chosen HEART – because of the production's focus on moral and justice I was hit somewhere between the brain and the heart.

The ticket purchasers for *The Journey to Reims* also chose BRAINS more often than any other body part (25%), but in general, the chosen body parts in this production are more evenly distributed with EYES at 24%, EARS at 19% and HEART at 13%. *The Journey to Reims* thus seems to 'speak to' several different body parts.

Here again, we see that the audience would have liked to choose more than one body part. It is interesting however, that it varies if they choose for instance HEART or BRAINS as the 'main' body part when they are feeling the experience in more than one place in their bodies.

HEART: My entire body was involved.

BRAINS: The brain 'covers' everything. It was a compound experience involving sight, hearing, feelings and rhythms.

Another theme emerging from the replies from *The Journey to Reims* is humour. Many comments mention this quality about the opera, but again this experience of a funny opera does not seem to be connected to one specific body part only:

BRAINS: Because I was laughing.

FACE: The opera was funny, I was laughing a lot.

The music is another theme arising from the replies, and it is the reason why relatively many have chosen EARS.

EARS: Because the music and the solos were a great experience for the mind.

The relation between the body part and the comments

This relation between the body part we choose and the experience we describe in the comments seems very complex and sometimes illogical.

This is obvious in the replies for the ballet, *Jewels*, where comments are often filled with adjectives expressing pleasure in one way or another (for instance "beautiful", "moving", "joy", and "breath taking"). These very similar descriptions, are often connected to various different body parts:

HEART: I was moved by the beautiful costumes and the dancers' love of dancing.

BRAIN: It was enchanting to be able to experience something this sublime.

The complexity of the relation between the body parts and the comments is also obvious the other way around, where the same body part is chosen for very different reasons. These comments are from *The Journey to Reims*:

BRAINS: A thought provoking production.

BRAINS: Because I was bored.^{iv}

These examples indicate that experiences with performance art are complex. Perhaps they rarely hit us or are felt in one isolated area, and perhaps we are all different in regards to the way we meet the performance – how we bring our own body into play when experiencing performance art and art in general.

The replies for the ballet stand out, however, for having the most variety in the chosen body parts. All of the 15 possible body parts were chosen:

HANDS: The pianist in the second act was miraculous. I had to sit on my hands not to disturb the people next to me with an intense round of 'air piano' on the railing.

GROIN: I felt it all the way down in my groin... the feelings that were portrayed and the stories of the dancers in the Pas de deux. It was a magnificent evening, wonderful costumes, and excellent dancing to great music!

TOES: A stupid way to express an experience.

With this last comment, it becomes clear that we cannot solely base an analysis of the experience on the quantitative results from the chosen body parts. The choices might as well be a result of provocation, curiosity (a click to see what others have replied), or the option that came closest to what the person felt.

When feeling it NOWHERE

In total across the three productions and the 1,297 replies 40 people chose NOWHERE for different reasons. Many of the comments within this body part were either negative towards the production or towards the question. Others liked the production but had difficulties attaching their experience to a specific body part:

NOWHERE: It was a dull and messy production. The singers couldn't quite meet the demands of Rossini. The production lacks the ease and humour that lies in the music.

NOWHERE: It was an interesting production, but it also required a bit of reflection. It didn't touch my heart and it didn't give me goose bumps, but I don't think this opera is supposed to.

NOWHERE: The question seems as pointless as the production.

The rare comments

All of the reflections above are a result of focussing on the prevalent tendencies in the replies.

Nevertheless, interesting insight may also come from looking at the rare and surprising comments.

This one from *The Journey to Reims* could for instance provide a theatre with new ideas as how to involve the audience in a production in the future:

HANDS: It was an amazing and fun experience. The libretto is a bit crazy, but the music is well known to me. This version of The Journey to Reims gave me a sense of being a part of the performance. My hands wanted to paint, put on clothes, move the props around, and grab after the paintings etc. [...] Compared to earlier, more traditional experiences, this opera felt almost including – without, however, I felt the need to sing. I felt more like painting. Perhaps the audience should all have had a sketchbook in our hands?

Comparison across art forms

This small survey gave us a sensation that some differences in comments are connected to the art form. When reading through all the comments from the three productions there is a clear difference in tone and themes when going from one production to another:

Jewels

EYES: Beautiful, aesthetic experience.

HEART: Because the ballet jumpstarted my feelings – I felt warm in my heart.

EYES: Wonderfully skilled dancers – so beautiful to watch.

Terror

HEART: A heavy decision that requires emotional awareness.

BRAINS: It initiated a great discussion.

HEART: A great emotional dilemma that moved my heart.

Jewels seems to have left the audience excited and uplifted by the dancers' skills, the scenography etc.

In contrast, the *Terror* audience talk a lot about being affected by the narrative and the dilemmas presented in the production. These differences suggests that ballet in general speaks to our senses in a different way than a play. However, this survey is too small to make final conclusions like that. The differences we see could also have to do with the specific productions rather than the art forms, or it might be a result of differences in the typical audiences attending these art forms and the way this group perceive, reflect on and communicate their experiences. In order to explore these questions further, it would be necessary to carry out the survey on many different productions within each art form.^v

Comparing with our traditional online survey

The aim of experimenting with this survey is to understand how the 'Where in your body'–question affects the audiences' reflection about and description of their personal experience with performance art. To do so we compare the comments from this survey to the results from our traditional questionnaire, where we (as mentioned) ask people to rate the performance and the overall experience and give us their critique and suggestions.

Frequency of comments

The first remarkable difference is the number of comments. In the traditional audience evaluation (AE from now on) approximately 40% leave a comment when they rate the production. With 'Where in your body' (from now on referred to as WIYB) around 85% elaborated on their choice by leaving a comment. We thus get more qualitative data from WIYB. However, this frequency could decrease for instance if the audience were asked this particular question after each experience in The Royal Danish Theatre.

There may be various reasons for these different response rates: One of the reasons for the frequent comments in AE could be the fact that the question we ask makes people reflect in a new way about their experience. When they have thought about it and chosen a body part, it might seem easier or more natural to back it up with the reflections that are already present in their minds.

The nature of the comments

Another difference lies in the nature of the comments. In the AE we often see suggestions for

improvements for instance regarding the production on stage, the scenography, and on the physical surroundings, the bar, the toilets, etc. This is expected, because we specifically ask people for suggestions and improvements. When the ticket purchasers in this survey describe their personal experience it is often done with many adjectives and with less personal reflection on *how* this opera affected them or *what* made it relevant:

Surprisingly funny.

Amazing scenography.

Beautiful!

Again, comments like these give us information rather than knowledge. It is highly appreciated that the audience often is very enthusiastic and happy about their theatre experience, but it is difficult to know exactly *why* this particular production was relevant to them.

With WIYB the comments tend to be a bit more informative and personal. We also see the pile of adjectives, but the replies are often also an explanation of the chosen body part.

Stomach: I had a delightful, bubbly feeling in my stomach during most of The Journey to Reims...😊

It seems likely that this person might have given a shorter comment about his/her experience (for instance "Funny"), if he/she was asked a different and more general question.

Furthermore, when we ask people to 'scan' their bodies and let their physical sensations determine their answer, this answer will almost automatically be very personal. We see this in some of the comments, which reveal quite a bit about the person.

TORSO: My personal centre is my torso. This is where I sense that something is right and good – that is where my joy springs from (from Jewels).

FEET: I danced ballet as a child. It is many years ago, but my feet still remember the positions and the steps, and this whole sensation is transported from the feet to the rest of my body (from Jewels).

With comments like these, we get close to the qualities of the personal conversation and the

qualitative interview, where we get a deeper understanding of the person we are talking to.

To get a brief and simplified overview of the differences we have made a scheme of the most frequent types of answers for each production from each survey (AE and WIYB):

	ART FORM	TRADITIONAL ONLINE SURVEY	WHERE IN YOUR BODY...
1	BALLET (Jewels)	A ballet as ballet was and should be.	TORSO: The experience gave me calm, blissful, joyful, and peaceful sensations, which spread precisely to my torso.
2	PLAY (Terror)	Very welcoming and very well executed by the performers.	HEART: I felt my pulse raise, when we had to decide if he should be convicted or acquitted.
3	OPERA (The Journey to Reims)	Excellent. Well sung. Well played and an all-together impressive staging and scenography.	EYES: It was a strong audio-visual experience. Amazing scenography and compositions. However, I wasn't emotionally affected due to the non-existent narrative.

As mentioned, the WIYB comments are more personal. They give us a better sense of the person who had the experience. It is important to note, however, that these comments don't give us a complete understanding of the specific experience. Instead, they would be a great point of departure for a follow up interview.

Text coding

As mentioned we also did a brief text coding on each of the three WIYB surveys. We used coding^{vi} as another way of detecting differences and similarities in the replies from the different surveys and across the different art forms. We wanted to see how this way of treating the data could give us new insight. A first, initial coding gave rise to the following themes: "The visual", "The auditory", "The audio visual", "The analytical", "The body-oriented", "The here and now", "The performative", and "Other". This way of dividing the answers tells us basically, that some comments (not surprisingly) are related

to specific senses. We see and hear and have audio-visual experiences. Some are focussed on their bodies or the present moment, and others yet again focus primarily on the production, which is very common in the answers from the traditional surveys

These themes in themselves do not tell us much about the details or complexity of the comments. However, after discussing the coding process and trying to understand what knowledge might arise from the themes, another level of themes seemed to emerge. Three different categories that tell us something about how the audience relate to the question and to their own experience: "The physical",

"the rational", and "the emotional".^{vii} There seems to be a tendency for people to relate to the production and their experience with a primary focus on either their pure physical reaction, their mental reflections caused by the experience, or the emotions they had during the experience.

An example of a physically focussed comment:

"It gave me goose bumps" (from *Jewels*).

An example of a mentally focussed comment:

"It gave me a lot to reflect on" (from *Terror*).

An example of an emotionally focussed comment:

"It was a big emotional dilemma, which moved by heart" (from *Terror*).

This perspective is interesting in relation to previous findings from one of our open rehearsals, where we learned that audiences react very differently to various artistic, performative elements and tools. Here a woman described how the production's many details and facts made it easier for her to relate to and believe in the story and thus be affected by it. Her friend, in contrast, felt that all these facts made it more difficult for her to open her heart and let herself be affected by the story. We have seen these different preferences a couple of times, and this coding process seems to yet again point at this individual perception of what makes performance art relevant, and the complexity of how, where and why it 'hits' us.

In this context, we used the coding process to add an extra perspective to our study and to confirm our insights about the affect of the question we ask the audience. Namely, that comments from WIYB are more personal than in ones from the traditional survey (AE). In AE most comments often revolve around the production (scenography, staging etc.) and secondly the performers (players/dancers/singers). In the WIYB the

comments primarily focus on one or more of the aforementioned perspectives: The physical, the rational, and the emotional. It is all about the personal embodied experience.

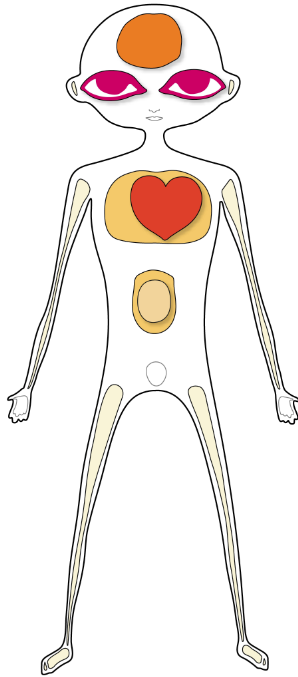
It is important to mention here, though, that text coding is a personal interpretation of the material, and these comments could be interpreted in other ways that would lead to different themes arising.

Further reflections

When summing up it hits me, the fact that so many of the tickets purchasers want to answer a somewhat unusual question and share something personal about themselves, says a lot about the audiences' love for and sense of loyalty towards the theatre.

As mentioned before, this material has brought forth and discussed many new questions, and left some of these still unanswered. What we have learned however is that when we ask the audience a personal and unexpected question they will start reflecting and in return give us a personal, relevant, and sometimes unexpected answer.

This focus on feeling the experience in your body is in line with the entire project's preoccupation with focused, qualitative listening, which we talk about [here](#). This time, by asking the audience "Where in your body would you place your experience with the production?" we ask the audience to listen to themselves and their bodies. This is a way for them to get in contact with their experience in a different and perhaps deeper way, and it is a way for us to get a new perspective on what experiences with performance art mean to people and how we may approach the conversation about art experiences differently.

RESULT PAGES^{viii}

Where in your body?

Royal Danish Theatre: *Balanchine's Juveler*

We asked audiences of Balanchine's abstract full-length ballet *Juveler* (Jewels) just one post-performance question: 'Where in your body would you place your experience of the production?' The question was sent to 2,075 spectators, and we received 589 replies (28%), with the responses giving an evocative insight into personal and embodied experiences of the production.

These are just a few of the responses:

32% EYES

- The eyes are the entrance to the rest of the body.
- They say that the eyes are the mirror of the soul. I experienced through my eyes – open and sometimes closed – I was moved and I shed a tear.
- I see the dance, and I have images from the production appearing from my inner eye. Images in my head.

26% HEART

- Perhaps mostly the heart, because there was a great atmosphere that I surrendered to.
- Because it was my first ballet. I felt in my heart that this was something really special. (Sabine 10 years.)
- Every time I see a ballet, my heart is filled with indescribable happiness and love for the dance. The theatre is my heaven. It fills me with energy and love.

21% BRAIN

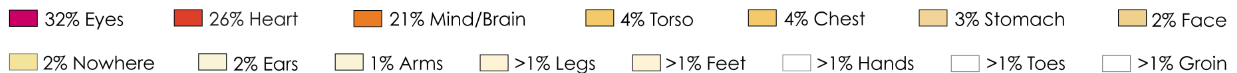
- A great evening at the ballet is about having different emotions stimulated, and the emotions are located in the brain.
- That is how it feels to me. But I am probably a thinker in general.
- I felt it primarily in the roots of my hair. It was amazing music.

4% TORSO

- The production made my centre bubble with joy. It was incredibly beautiful – thank you so much.

4% CHEST

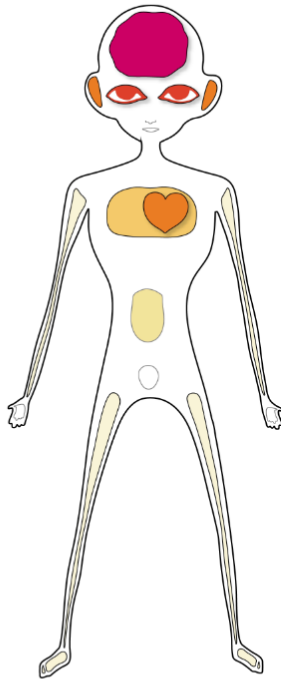
- The rush from the show, the music, and the amazing dance affected my breathing. Sometimes I completely forget to breathe when I watch the Royal Danish Ballet.



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Where in your body?

Royal Danish Theatre: *Rejsen til Reims*

We asked audiences of Rossini's opera *Rejsen til Reims* (Il viaggio a Reims) just one post-performance question: 'Where in your body would you place your experience with the production?' The question was sent to 1,611 spectators, and we received 481 replies (30%), with the responses giving an evocative insight into personal and embodied experiences of the production.

These are just a few of the responses:

25% BRAIN

- The brain seem to denote an overall experience. That is why I chose it. It was a complex experience. It is a combination of our vision, our eyes, our emotions and rhythms.
- Happiness. Relaxation. Concentration. Joy.
- The music made me high. I had trouble sleeping when I got home.

23% EYES

- It was very funny. I laughed so hard my eyes teared up.
- It was a very visual opera. There was a lot going on all the time.

19% EARS

- Because the difficult arias were so remarkably executed.
- Because the sound is the most important thing (the sight comes in second).

13% HEART

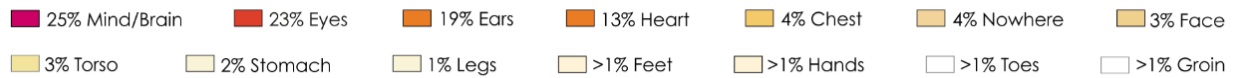
- Opera enchants my heart and makes it bubble with joy.

4% CHEST

- I wanted to take deep breaths and sing along. I imagined myself being on stage.

4% NOWHERE

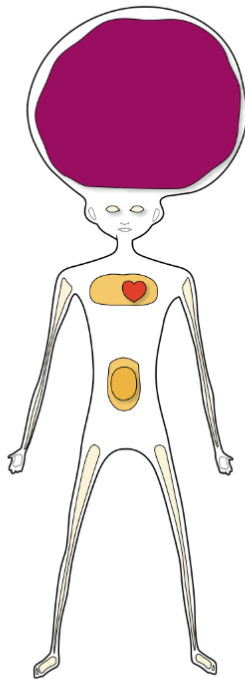
- For me the experience involves eyes, ears, brains, and heart as well as my entire muscular system. It is impossible for me to choose just one body part.



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Where in your body?

Royal Danish Theatre: *Terror*

We asked audiences of Ferdinand von Schirach's courtroom set play *Terror* just one post-performance question: 'Where in your body would you place your experience of the production?' The question was sent to 719 spectators, and we received 227 replies (30%), with the responses giving an evocative insight into personal and embodied experiences of the production.

These are just a few of the responses:

75% BRAIN

- Critical, current, relevant, and it made me think – awesome!
- Because I had to relate to complex ethical dilemmas. The play required a detailed understanding of the law, structures in our society, and ethics. You couldn't just sit back and relax.
- Moral, logical thinking, choosing the lesser evil, the influence by Kant and other philosophers etc. All of that is embedded in the brains, I guess!?
- Because the play introduces a problem that requires of us to think thoroughly and not let our emotions control us.

9% HEART

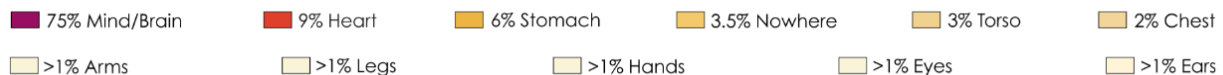
- Because *Terror* to me represents a profound dilemma. We cannot judge the defendant solely by the principles of the law. We have to listen to our emotions – our humanity – in order to make a decision. If we simply go by the law it is clear: the defendant is guilty. But we cannot legislate our way out of everything. Sometimes we must consult our humanity and that is located in our hearts.
- Life and death is a sensitive subject. I felt it many places in my body, but especially in my heart.

6% STOMACH

- In the beginning, I got butterflies in my stomach, because the play was incredibly exciting. Later the story gave me a knot in my stomach, and by the end, I felt disappointed by the final verdict.
- The feeling in my stomach often tells me what to do in life.

3.5% NOWHERE

- Stupid question. It almost gave me heartburn.



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ⁱ In comparison, our traditional survey for *Terror* received a 16% response rate (261 responses), *The Journey to Reims* received a 16% response rate (319 responses), and *Jewels* received a 17% response rate (844 responses).

ⁱⁱ The analysis is carried out in collaboration with Kasper Koefoed Larsen and with inspiration from Matthew Reason.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the qualitative analysis of the comments, we chose to combine the results from the torso and the stomach/gut as it seems that many of the audience have similar understandings of the areas.

^{iv} It is worth mentioning, however, that the choice of body part doesn't seem completely random. When reading through the comments organized according to body part within each production, we see a slight change of tone when going for instance from BRAINS to HEART. Here we move from somewhat logic descriptions to comments that are a bit more emotionally focused.

^v For the quantitative differences across art forms, see the result pages.

^{vi} Cf. the brief description of the method in the beginning of the report.

^{vii} These themes are similar to Matthew Reason's findings in his study with dance performances. Read more about this [here](#).

^{viii} These result pages is carried out in collaboration with Matthew Reason. Graphics by Brian Hartley.