1. Introduction

I would like to discuss how adults — parents, teachers but also artists — have an enormous importance in the construction of social and psychological taboos among children and teenagers. The theatre has a huge potential as mediator of psychological and social problems among children and youngsters.

_Theatre should not illustrate, it has to BE._

Kjeld Abell, Danish writer

Theatre is basically about discussing human basic matters with a background of the reality or the society we live in. In a developing world community where we mostly communicate and meet by virtual means, theatre (again) has the potential of being an intimate social and cultural meeting place.
The main strength of the theatre “being there now as it happens” —not experience by distance. The non–mediated and direct communication, where the total attendance lies in the present, unfolds in a direct emotional communication with the audience. Important issues are staged in a dialogue and exchange between the stage (action) and the audience (the reaction). Thus the theatre can serve as an important mouthpiece where we can challenge the currents of society, talk openly about taboos and create a reflecting room with open doors towards positive development in many ways.

In the early stages of our lives, we learn how to mirror ourselves in each other. The adults are the role model and decision makers of what the children will experience as being right and wrong. If the role model shows uncertainty or discomfort when a matter is mentioned (or not mentioned), we teach the child that this issue is a no–go. If the topic furthermore is not discussed in school or articulated through other media, such as books, TV, movies or theatre, the topic will remain non–existing, a taboo.

The ignorance and uncertainty of the adult can very easily affect the communication between the theatre and the child —especially if the play is controversial or the adult lacks the insight of the child’s real live and the taboos— established by the grownups —which the child is confronted with.

Whereas adult taboos are linked to social issues such as obesity, alcoholism, unemployment, finances and loneliness —the taboos of the children and youth also are
linked to psychological issues related to creation of identity, sexuality and belonging.

Therefore these are essential issues about being alive, which confronts all humans —regardless of age.

In theatre Graense–Loes, we have experienced adults leaving the auditorium in anger or subsequently telling us that the subjects of our performances are too challenging and provocative for the youngsters to experience. Sometimes we are told that children and youngsters should be protected and theatre is about giving hope and confidence. These facts and experiences give substance to my discussion of taboos in theatre today.

For is it not exactly the adults who insists on tabooing in children and young theatre, conducting linguistic or thematic censorship?

2. Graense–Loes and the topics of live
In Theatre Graense–Loes we strive to create challenging and confrontational theatre, which breaks with the traditional theatrical forms and narrative techniques. This often means that the spectator is staged, as the being one who tells the actual story from his or her experiences and interpretation of the piece.

Graense–Loes works with an alternative and experimental production form and typically work in a theatre devising process. The theatre plays are based on our desire to handle a matter, which we have found out to be relevant for the youngsters. Prior to production, we have a long research period. Through outreach (finding relevant
literature, consulting experts and having dialogue with the age group), we explore the theme of the performance.

Graense–Loes does not aim to make theatre with social educational effect. Thus we have not found a one-dimensional truth, we try to make the audience comprehend and comply. Our performances can be seen as starting points that hopefully will launch debates on how human beings relate to each other, and the way we interact. Graense–Loes are interested in the moral of humans as social beings.

It is important to emphasize that teens can be audience at “adult theatre” and adults can experience both children’s and youth theatre with great benefit, as entertainment or learning. But theatre must work with matters which are characteristic of the age group that is being targeted, in our case the teenagers.

In the last five years Graense–Loes have studied and staged topics based on the teenager's optics: being a divorce child, the unhappy love, depression, ecstasy, the breakaway from parents, family and social relationships, loneliness, identity, physical change, sexuality, the choices one faces in terms of education, religion contra rationality, etc.

3. Case: Fucking Alone...!
In the winter of 2007 Graense–Loes created an audio-visual performance, we called Fucking Alone...! The show discussed how technology simulates (and you might even say stimulates) the “real” world, and —on the other hand— loneliness as existential basic conditions.
"Fucking Alone...!

premiered in a 2room apartment in Copenhagen, where the audience participated as “invisible” guests. The apartment worked as an installation, and was painted entirely gray —a symbol of the main character’s petrifaction and the only colour you could see, was a lonely goldfish swimming in a fish bowl as a symbol of being alive but not being free.

The stage itself was setup in the bedroom, where the audience —in a voyeuristic confrontational situation— witnessed a young girl's life. She blogged on the Internet, bought pizza and clothes on the web, but her mail inbox remained empty, as she had no online friends. The girl was alone and her sexuality was investigated through images from the web.

The young girl went on an existential journey (through the computer) to reach out on the other side —the real world— to create new life.

The performance discussed our relationship to the surrounding world and loneliness as an existential basic element generated by modern society.

The show contributed to the ongoing critical discussion about the impact of World Wide Web upon social relations, contrary to the normal kind of “real” physical relations. Now it was actually possible to survive all by yourself with the computer as the only communication tool to the outside world. It was not strictly necessary to go outside your door. Education, purchasing foods/clothes and social stimulation can be done online —even virtual sex can be done performed by one’s avatar.
**Fucking Alone...!** is a part of theatre Graense–Loes ongoing investigation of the search by the modern human being for identity, ideal relationships towards others and society in general. All of our performances focus on—with different angles—the human effort to find the truth about our selves and our surroundings, so we can make life—if not joyful—then at least easier to deal with. This means that we need to address all the matters that are important parts of the creation of our identities.

### 4. Sexuality and language

The youngsters are situated in a phase of sexual realisation and development unlike adults. Children, teenagers and adults examine and satisfy themselves sexually—alone or with others.

Of course, this does not mean that you necessarily have to show for example masturbation on stage, since the topic is sensitive, intimate and private. But we—as adults and theatre artists—will have to deal with and recognize the naturalness of human sexual urges and desires—whether we attempt to repress the fact that children and young people do have a sexual life, because this makes us embarrassed.

Sexuality is a sensitive issue, which is strongly linked to religion and culture. Since 1960’s Denmark has had the status of being an international symbol of sexual liberation. This image is now catching up on us Danes. And this does surprise us, and our collective identity as being (sexually) liberated and open-minded people, who want all matters
to be identified and treated.

Even though my generation have been rationally and freely educated and brought up with children’s books and plays written by the well-intentioned adults who — in response to their parents' generation - in a very direct and down-to-earth language described in detail how to have sex and make babies— we have now become narrow-minded and shy.

The parents of today hand-over sex education to the schoolteachers, who then hand-over the job to external professional sex consultants. In many ways, the sexual liberation in Denmark is on the decline — perhaps in connection with the aggressive sexualisation of public space and easy access to online pornography.

But where the adult audience worried about the performance Fucking Alone...!’s open-minded approach to sexuality and our focus on the growing use of technology — which is a natural part of the youngsters daily lives — the reactions of the young audience was aimed towards the more critical backside of the conditions: the loneliness of the main character and how identity formation happens through the Internet as a mirror of their own development and reality. They actually experienced the sexual representation in the performance as liberating — some painful parts of their secret lives were articulated in the performance with respect.

The young audience recognized themselves and their world. Their immediate response was immediate,
surprised and full of confidence. In the same way, as when you are facing another human being who suddenly speaks your native language in a situation, where you felt like being the only one in the whole world who spoke this language. Jette Lund, dramaturg.

Around the same time as we produced *Fucking Alone...!* a new law in the Danish primary school was introduced, which concerned the language of children and teenagers. Many teachers felt that children and teenagers had been using an inappropriate and offensive language towards each other and towards the teachers as well.

Living in a small country, you could say the Danes have a nostalgic relationship towards their language and culture. Constantly we are alert because of the dangers of language deteriorating. Foreign phrases and words, as a natural part of globalization, have become a part of everyday language.

And especially the influence of US–American culture and language in connection with for example hip-hop culture and slang expressions used to establish and maintain status and hierarchy; this provoked and outraged many uncomprehending adults. Words like “Fuck”, “Whore” and “Bitch” and many others were banned, and violation of the new language regulations would result in suspension from school.

With the title *Fucking Alone...!* we used the word “fucking” as a swear word, but also as the actual meaning; “Fucking Alone” meaning masturbation. For that reason
alone it was difficult to sell *Fucking Alone...!* to schools, since it contained a word that was forbidden to say — even for teachers.

**5. China**

Later we toured with *Fucking Alone...!* in Germany, France, Finland, Lithuania, China and Mexico. And everywhere the performance has made a positive contribution to the discussion on the use or misuse of the Internet, loneliness and especially sexuality (of the teenagers). However, both in China and Finland we were asked to change the title of the performance to the less sensitive and more neutral title *Ctrl + Delete*. In China the show also suffered a mild censorship of the more “sensitive” parts in the performance.

It is not our intention in Graense–Loes to make unnecessary provocation or be offensive to other cultures. But also in China the censorship seemed to have been issued on the grounds of an uncertainty towards the minds and sensitiveness of the teenagers.

The presence of the adults can be a disruptive element, and during a cross-cultural conversation after a performance, it was not possible for us to get the youngsters involved. They asked excessive polite questions as: how much did it cost to send the set design and props from Denmark?, what does a pizza cost in Europe? and, do the Danish school children wear school uniforms? The dialogue was unsatisfactory content-wise and culturally. Although of course it must always be observed if there is no need or desire subsequently to reflect on a performance.
A considerable irritation and indignation occurred among the schoolteachers when we asked them to go outside the door; this triggered a spontaneous, surprised outbreak of joy by the young Chinese boys and girls. From hereon the dialogue became an unforgettable experience for both parties. Now the thoughts behind the performance could be talked through in an equal exchange between sender and receiver.

One girl stood up with tears down the cheeks and explained how she felt lonely and asked what she could do. A boy described loneliness as a possessive dragon, which had settled in his heart and how he fought it by playing football. They were intelligent and sensitive young people, who through the theatre got the possibility to open up and share their thoughts with each other, in a (school) system that otherwise do not encourage exchange of feelings and reflections.

The dialogue was videotaped and the adult teachers, wanted to see the film to gain insight into what is happening in a young (universally) heart.

6. Confessions, experience

The stage language in contemporary performing arts can sometimes be difficult to decode, and may create an uncertainty whether the spectator has understood the content or not.

Graense–Loes seeks dialogue and communication with the audience, and we always offer both the organiser and the audience a following conversation or discussion.
With all due respect for the individual experience by the audience of the performance, these dialogues have given us a good insight into the young generation: what worries them, affects them, move them and occupies them. Strange it is, that none of the young feel provoked (in a negative sense) or frightened by our performances as many adults do, but rather feel satisfied and understood.

But it is not always easy to involve the youngsters. And as an artist it may be unsatisfactory not knowing whether the message of the performance has been received or not.

7. Suggestion: School/learning material and communication

As creative artists, we do have a responsibility to work—without bias— with the matters that are relevant for the age group we are addressing. Otherwise, we contribute the maintenance of bias or intensifying taboos, because we escape from highlighting and addressing the issue. Taking up themes that do not only have entertainment value, it is very important to create a framework for a following dialogue.

For our last two performances, we have made school/learning material, in a desire to build a bridge between the artistic understanding and the thematic content of the performances that allow insight and widening of both theatre experience and perception of the theatre’s role and function today.

The teachers can use this material in the classroom,
so the teachers will become an active part in the context and can advance the dialogue, maybe even with the parents.

8. Conclusion

You can discuss whether the school as an institution should educate and influence children besides the traditional academic courses. But when art or theatre is involved in school contexts, this can provide powerful tools to the students for understanding and reflecting on matters about being a human in modern society, and maybe from that making some betters choices in life.

This peculiar vacuum — the teen age — where you no longer are a child but certainly not an adult either, is in many ways a difficult period and sometimes full of pain, despair, depression, troublesome sex, maybe alcohol and drugs. And even though we’d like to protect the young against the (sometimes) harsh realities of life, the best way to meet them, is by recognizing their situation and showing them all kinds of maybe hidden aspects of life, which fortunately also is full of joy, humour and desire and ability to capture life and the world.

The performances of Graense–Loes try to deal with the hidden sides of life, and we are staging “taboos” as being fabricated by the adults. The performances focus on the frightening, vulnerable and beautiful aspects of being a (young) human being today.

Adults often say, “this or that is not a matter for children” if they believe a matter is beyond the perception and range of ability for the child. But also adults have
limits of comprehension, and they can be very sensitive to matters outside their own rational world.

This is why Graense–Loes makes theatre for the young—and the adults if they dare.

Welcome to reality!

Katrine Karlsen
Artistic leader and actress
Theatre & Art Production,
Company Graense–Loes
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