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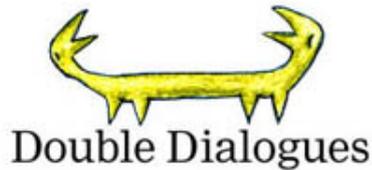
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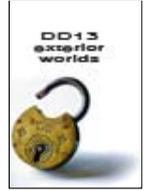
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Issue 13, Summer 2010 Hidden Stories: Exterior Worlds

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Hidden Stories: Listening to the Audience at the Live Performance

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Abstract

This paper explores how audiences describe and evaluate their experience of a live performance. Much of the arts marketing literature measures audience satisfaction with the entire event, including pre and post show talks, parking, ticket price, seating, merchandise and refreshments. Research undertaken at a range of live performing arts events in 2008 and 2009 revealed ‘hidden stories’ of audience members’ responses to performances. These responses are indicative of four aspects of the audience experience – knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement. The stories, and their indicators, are the audience measure of quality of performance. This paper uses audience research at three contemporary theatre companies, to test and validate the audience experience as a new quality assessment instrument: the Arts Audience Experience Index.

Introduction

Ever since accountability in the public funding for performing arts was first thought necessary, quality in the live performing arts has been measured by quantifiable evidence of popularity, such as audience satisfaction surveys, attendance and subscriber levels, number of performances, number of new productions and earned-income (Boerner & Renz, 2008). Other measures also operate by qualitative evidence of expertise, such as peer and critical review (Tobias 2004, Voss & Voss 2000), the reputation of the company or artist or director, receipt of awards, festival participation, and sponsorship and grants. Neither of these sets of measures is responsive to the audience who, by virtue of their participation and their personal measure of the quality of their

experience of the performance, will re-attend.

The focus on the quantifiable aspects of audience attendance and the qualitative assessments by experts runs contrary to trends in marketing literature and, more specifically, arts marketing. Marketing in the arts is now driven by a focus on the qualitative experiences of audiences, including an audience quest for appropriation, connectivity and transformation through the arts experience. Marketing practice and literature recognises that new immersive models of performance, presentation, production and distribution are required in order to attract and retain audiences. Audiences increasingly want to shape their own experience, and marketing strategies should be refocussed on empowering audiences, not targeting them (Scheff Bernstein 2007). Where once audiences were seen as primarily passive (Wheeler 2004; Boorsma 2006), it is now acknowledged that the audience contributes to the 'co-creation of value' (Lusch & Vargo cited in Etgar 2008). This is explained by Nicolette Fraillon, Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Australian Ballet: 'The energy is incredibly dependent on what is coming back from an audience. I don't think audiences are aware of the impact they can have on a performance' (Percival, 2008: 11). A comment by Elaine Acworth on the Performing Arts blog of *Our Brisbane*, brings another thread to the co-creation aspect of the audience experience:

I think, in a good piece of work, an audience can expand the meaning that they read there. I think there's a space made in the work — in that place mid-way between the actors and the participants sitting in the dark — where the possibility of layered meanings exists — the resonances of an individual audience member's life making themselves heard in and around the performance (Acworth 2009).

The new arts consumer 'is on a quest for self-actualisation where the creative or cultural experience is expected to fulfil a spiritual need that has little to do with the traditional marketing plan of an arts organisation.' Audiences 'will be fiercely loyal if they can experience fulfilment and realisation in the arts experience' (Radbourne 2007: 3).

In order to contribute to a new and developing knowledge of the audience's experience at a performance, and their perceptions of the quality of that performance, this paper focuses on the audience participation at theatrical performances in Melbourne, Australia, in 2008 and 2009. The researchers used focus groups to establish four indicators of the qualities of the audience experience, which were then used to construct an index by which the quality of performances could be assessed by surveys of audiences.

The Audience Experience as a Story

The arts experience is values-based and arises from self-determination. Even

when the arts product is tangible, such as a performance, a painting, a ceramic pot, or a film, its attributes or values lie in the intangible benefits to the individual audience member. Cultural economists describe two values of the arts product, cultural or economic (market). The consumer, or audience, assesses the cultural value deriving from a personal interpretation of beauty, colour, form, quality, social meaning or representation, and an associated market value, if the object is to be resold. This paper addresses the individual consumer's intrinsic cultural values. These values may be aesthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic or authentic (Throsby 2001). This is further emphasized in the work of Lewis and Bridger (2001) who described the process of consumer need for self-actualisation and quest for authenticity. They used four elements of the new consumers to build a new model of authentic loyalty. Consumers were described as individualistic, involved, independent and informed. Lewis and Bridger defined authenticity as a product or service that can be trusted to do what is claimed for it (2001: 194). Importantly they described the personalisation of authenticity arising out of each individual's personal experience and response:

One cannot mass produce authenticity. Rather, it has to be introduced on an almost person-to-person basis, with individual needs, desires, expectations and interests being fully accounted for (Lewis and Bridger 2001: 194).

Audiences are consumers, and arts audiences clearly represent Lewis and Bridger's 'new consumer'. They have moved up Maslow's pyramid of human needs, seeking personal fulfilment in artistic experiences. They are intent on closing the gap between the person they are (the real self), and the person they want to be (the ideal self). This self-actualisation is realised in the hidden stories that audiences tell to describe their expectations and experiences of a performance and their quest for authenticity, which is their personal definition of quality. The shift in the analysis of audiences reflects a shift in focus from the authenticity of objects to the authenticity of subjects. In other words it is a shift from quantitative measures to the narrative of the experience.

Audience reception research is not new; Meyerhold's theatre in 1924 developed a schema for calibrating audience reactions from absolute silence at one end of the spectrum to assaulting the stage at the other (Martin & Sauter 1995). Academic research in the field has built on Carlson's notion of the audience as a contributor to the event (Carlson 1989), and Bennett's use of theories of spectatorship to analyse theatre audiences (Bennett 1997). These studies have been important in shifting the focus from a preoccupation with the intention of the playwright or director, to an interest in interrogating the audiences' frames of reference. More recently, to address the theoretical problem of characterising the audience as a single homogenous entity, Tulloch (2005) has employed the term 'audiencing' to show how the cultural frames of education and marketing, for example, inform responses to productions, and he theorises the construction of audiences in terms of a range of institutional,

discursive and interpretative frames. However, despite these and other academic studies, key aspects of the felt responses of audiences to performances and the way these are generated by individual experiences remains little explored. As Knowles has argued: 'Precisely how audiences produce meaning in negotiation with the particular, local theatrical event... has only rarely been analysed or modelled in any detail' (Knowles 2004:17).

Research is required that elicits the audience's stories about their experience of performances, in order to identify the qualities that build self-actualisation and loyalty amongst attendees, and empower audiences in decision-making by arts companies and funding bodies. Such techniques should be established with the aim of collecting data not on the size of the audience or their satisfaction with the performance, but on the ways in which attending the arts has achieved self-actualisation and enhanced their lives, which can then lead to deep understandings of how arts performances affect the lives of viewers. Eliciting such stories is no easy task; as Pitts points out, for audience members to articulate the value of their experience is often 'a tremendous ... challenge, since part of its appeal lies in the wordlessness with which it connects participants more deeply with themselves and other people' (Pitts 2005: 10).

Only recently have research techniques been applied to audience research that aim to overcome such obstacles. The 'most recent evolution of these research attentions zeroes in on capturing highly personalized understandings of arts experiences' (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin 2009: 3). Techniques used for such data collection include narrative inquiry (White & Hede 2008), participant diaries (Pitt 2005); and interviewing for 'deep conscientizing' to achieve a 'dig of lived experience, inviting informants to make connections across arts experiences as well as across life experiences and life struggles' (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin 2009: 4). Brown (2004), for example, used interviews with audience members to identify how arts experiences lead to identity formation, while other scholars have attempted to define the effect of the arts in such categories as 'spirituality', 'captivation', 'self-expression', 'self-awareness' 'well-being' and 'community'.

Whilst such categories can be useful in classing the different values audience members will ascribe to their experience, the categories themselves are often left ill-defined, perhaps as a consequence of the research participant's struggle to articulate the effect of their encounter with the performance. Furthermore, some categories – such as 'spirituality' and 'self-awareness' – do little to provide information that is beneficial to decision-makers about how to enhance such qualities in order to attract and retain audiences. By contrast, this paper showcases research that draws out audience members' stories of their experiences, and analysis of these stories that can be used to assist in decision-making by companies and funding agencies, and can thereby empower the audience.

Hypothesis

Listening to the 'hidden stories' that audiences tell through feedback can teach us about the quality of their experience of the performing arts. Here 'hidden stories' refers to the critical (but largely unrevealed) affective responses of audiences to what they see and hear as spectators of the performing arts.

Experience Indicators

Our analysis of the attributes of the audience experience from previous research and reports by leading scholars in the field (Brown & Novak 2007; McCarthy et al 2004) led to the establishment of four audience experience indicators: knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement.

Knowledge is concerned with providing audiences with information to enable a better understanding of the performance leading to an enriched experience and likely return visit (Kawashima 2000; 2006). Knowledge also includes the intellectual stimulation or cognitive traction (Brown & Novak 2007) created by the performance for that audience. Cognitive growth occurs when individuals focus attention on a work of art, developing perception and intellectual stimulation to make sense of what they see and hear (McCarthy et al 2004).

Risk is described in four related ways that determine the likelihood of re-consumption for theatre goers: functional risk (the possibility that the product may not 'meet the consumer's expectation'); economic risk (the cost complicates the decision-making process); psychological risk (the product may pose a threat to the consumer's self-image) and social risk (how the consumer wishes to be perceived by other people) (Colbert et al 2001). The context, relevance (social and cultural familiarity) and anticipation of the audience member form measurable and manageable 'readiness' constructs (Brown & Novak 2007). Risk management involves enhancing the individual's 'readiness' and perception of positive risk.

Authenticity is associated with truth and believability (Grayson & Martinec 2004, Leigh et al 2006). The greater the performance's authenticity perceived by audience members, the greater their enjoyment of the experience. Authenticity has two main components. One is the authenticity of what is offered (whether the music is faithful to the score), and the second is the audience's emotional perception. Our previous research identified both the artistic authenticity of the performance and the audience's own emotional perception associated with 'reality' or 'believability' as factors in the experience of quality (Radbourne, Glow, Johanson & White 2009).

Collective engagement is an audience's experience of engagement with performers and other audience members, and the bond or expression of communal meanings that occurs with others before or after the performance (Boorsma 2006; Jacobs 2000; McCarthy et al. 2004; Brown & Novak 2007). The audience's relationship to the performers, the audience members' sense of enjoyment shared, and opportunities to discuss the performance with other

audience members and staff all heighten the sense of social inclusion and thus the perception of quality.

Knowledge, risk, authenticity and collective engagement are the indicators that encompass how audiences measure quality and when measured, they form an index of the arts experience that arts organisations can use to build audience engagement and participation.

Methodology

The research was undertaken in partnership with three performing arts organizations based in Melbourne: the Malthouse Theatre, the Melbourne Theatre Company and Red Stitch Actors Theatre. These organizations selected the productions which fell within the time frame of the research project. Focus groups were then conducted with audience members, some of whom were company subscribers recruited by the three organizations and some of whom were audience members who had not previously attended a performance of that company. The aim behind this approach was to reflect the experiences of people who would commonly choose to see such performances and of those for whom it was a new experience. The responses of subscribers and those who had previously never attended the company's work were usually consistent in their reflections on what they valued in a live performance. The focus group questions prompted the respondents to reflect on the nature of their experience as audience members and to consider a variety of elements which enhanced or detracted from that experience.

Focus groups were preferred as a research method owing to their collective nature. In response to the fact that it is difficult for audience members to articulate what is often a deeply felt experience, it was thought that the participants of the focus groups would assist one another to find words to describe their experience. The research chronology was designed to be cumulative: while the first two sets of focus groups at the Malthouse and the Melbourne Theatre Company were used to identify the common attributes audiences ascribe to their experience, the final focus group at Red Stitch used this information to test the ways in which audiences looked to enhance such attributes. For instance, because it had been established at the Malthouse and the Melbourne Theatre Company that participants identified risk as an indicator determining whether they chose to attend a performance, participants at the Red Stitch focus group were probed to discover whether they sought measures to ameliorate risk.

Case Study 1: Malthouse Theatre

A focus group was conducted at the Malthouse Theatre immediately following a performance of *The Tell-Tale Heart* – Barry Kosky's adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's short story.

When asked about the role of the audience, a respondent commented:

To be discriminating. ... I can't think of any way in which I can give something to it, except my attention or my appreciation, but I like to have something that I take away from it. That's why you go really – so that you can actually take something that will hopefully make you think about your life in general.

Another respondent stated:

It's almost an education thing, just do it for exposure.

In this case study, respondents revealed their understanding of the role of knowledge and/or learning as a critical part of the audience experience, as a means of prompting further thought and discussion. These comments suggest that audience engagement is, in part, a function of learning; the experience is significant if one can 'expose' oneself to its educative message; and 'take something away from it', something that develops one's understanding of what is being listened to or watched. Such analysis underscores the point made by Kushner (2003: 120) that audiences seek to maximize 'utility' from aesthetic experiences.

While some respondents' comments had positive connotations (as the quotations above exemplify), some comments revealed negative learning experiences. Some expressed discomfort about not being sufficiently 'in the know' to value or to understand what they were seeing. In this conversation two respondents discuss the experience of watching the production:

A: I was amazed the audience [was] raptured at the end ... and I thought, what for?

... I heard some people when ... we were in the queue going in, talking about [the director] so he's obviously renowned, clearly I missed that ...

B: It's just that thing of everyone sitting down and ... that is why I find live performance quite difficult. ... [W]hen people started laughing ... it's like, are they in the know? ... Did they know the people, did they know stuff about the play, I mean I don't know anything about it... I didn't know [Poe] wrote plays ...

These responses suggest that there is hidden knowledge within the experience of viewing live performing arts which can challenge those not 'in the know'. These findings confirm Jacobs' point that the experience of art can produce anxiety for audiences: in particular, anxiety around the realization that 'there is something in an arts performance that demands to be figured out' (2000: 139).

Case Study 2: Melbourne Theatre Company

A focus group was conducted at the MTC after a performance of the French comedy *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, starring popular television actor Magda Szubanski, at the Playhouse Theatre.

Participants were asked to comment on their feelings about the theatre as a live event and they revealed that several kinds of communication affected the value of the performance for them as audience members. These included communication between performers and the audience, communication from the audience to the performers, and interaction between members of the audience.

For some participants it was important to have a sense of what was expected of them as audience members. A lack of clarity about this, particularly when there was no encouragement from the performers, led to disappointment with the live-performance experience. One respondent explained his preference for stand-up comedy and live music over theatre partly as a result of the different nature of performer–audience interaction involved:

[In stand-up comedy and live music] there's a lot of interaction and ... the performer is trying to get ... audience participation and feedback and in theatre performance I don't necessarily think that that's the case. I think it's more like art on the wall in that it's about how the audience perceived it without having really much interaction ... you can't get any information from the performer as to whether he wants people to laugh or if he wants people to be silent so I find that quite difficult which may well be one of the main reasons why I don't go and see a lot of live theatre.

Another respondent suggested that his engagement with the theatre performance would have been greater had there been more eye contact with the performers. These responses suggest that the audience experience may be improved by a sense that performers acknowledge the involvement of the audience in contributing to a production.

This sense of the audience as contributing to a production was found to heighten the audience experience: the sense that audience behaviour actually contributed to the quality of a production. Respondents frequently described themselves that, as a group, they had improved a performance through appropriate but generous applause, laughter or even silence. By contrast, some respondents felt there was too little opportunity to give feedback to the performers, and they reported a sense of alienation: 'some of us said that we didn't feel like a part of the performance at all, we just felt like we had to sit and watch ... and be quiet'.

The third kind of interaction is audience-to-audience interaction. At this focus group, audience members discussed the pleasure of cultivating a shared interest in the particular art form during a performance: ‘I find that that way of being able to chat to the people beside you, even during the performance, but not during the piece obviously, is very much an important part of my enjoyment of the evening’. This was particularly an advantage that respondents perceived in the status of a subscriber, as they became familiar with the people who repeatedly occupied the seats beside them. In contrast, respondents who felt there was no opportunity for communication – that they felt expected to ‘sit there and be quiet’ – reported less engagement with the experience.

Beyond one-on-one communication, respondents frequently suggested that simply being part of an audience was one of the attractions of the live performance. For example:

[Y]ou have a connection individually about how it is affecting you, and then sometimes you may be swept up with others.

[I]t’s a different experience to sitting down and flicking through the channels and going ... ‘I’ll just watch this’. Because you’re part of a thing ...

The pleasure the respondents reported as a consequence of being part of an audience supports Jacobs’ (2000) finding that the co-presence of others in the concert hall and the ability to discuss the performance are significant factors in heightening the audience experience.

Case Study 3: Red Stitch Actors Theatre

A focus group was held with nine audience members immediately following a performance of a contemporary drama, *Lobby Hero*. Participants were asked if they sought prior knowledge on the production as a way of ameliorating the potential ‘risk’ of attendance. There was general agreement that prior knowledge was not sought, but participants revealed different reasons for this. For some respondents, the fact of being a subscriber and pre-purchasing a season’s tickets meant that they attended the productions regardless of reviews or other information: ‘I knew nothing about this performance. I hadn’t read a review... There would have been no reason for me not to come because I go to them all’. For other respondents, supplementary information was not sought because they wanted to be as open to the experience as possible:

A: I don’t need [a synopsis] – I actually like a surprise when I come to the theatre.

B: I never know [anything about the production beforehand]...and I think that’s part of the expectation that you come just open to [the idea] that it’s going to be a good experience

This notion of the pleasure of being open to the experience of performance is related to the idea of risk – the possibility that taking risks can be a positive part of the theatre-going experience. Where audiences at theatre productions by other companies appear to benefit from pre-show or program information as a way of minimising ‘risk’, here the audience do not necessarily seek prior knowledge on the show, because they have an understanding of the ensemble, the actors, the types of productions, and have already made the decision to subscribe or attend based on that knowledge and expectation.

Asked about ‘risk’, participants in this focus group expressed pleasure in the challenge that the content of the work often presents to them. One respondent commented:

I think [the company] deliberately choose plays that have a challenge for the audience...I think for some people that could be a risk.

Another respondent added:

This isn't risky theatre because it lives up my expectation of being in-your-face. Risky theatre is subscribing to the mainstream theatre companies and taking the risk that you'll be bored witless.

Such comments indicate that this audience self-identify with the company's selection of productions. They want to take emotional risks. They want to be challenged. They expect to have to take a personal risk in attending a performance.

Participants also spoke about how they came to this company's productions because they sought to learn more about themselves and society from attendance. For many of the respondents it was the sense that the theatre being produced had an authenticity for them as they related the play's themes to their own lives:

Many of the topics of the plays are ones which, after you have watched them, you do consider and reflect on in your own life.

Part of this sense of authenticity appeared to be related to the intimacy of the venue which enhanced the engagement of some audience members:

I like to feel that they are playing for me...it is the play you feel intimate with.

The respondents articulated their expectation of high ‘quality’ work which was associated with their quest for authentic experience:

I am always quite excited about coming because they are usually new plays, quite often Australian premiers...something I have not seen before and something I am going to have to think about. I really like

the idea that it is a small ensemble...and I feel I get to know a lot of the actors and I really enjoy that.

Many of the audience responses began with 'I', personalising their quest for authenticity through the need for the real self to their ideal self. They described their reactions to other audience members, to the performers, and to the content of the play. Each response laid bare a value and an intrinsic benefit. Each response required reflection on the aesthetic, critical (intellectual) analysis against an expectation or prior knowledge and understanding, and the framing of a narrative to self identify with the experience. The cumulative experiences define the audience personal definitions of the quality of that experience.

What has been learned from this is that every time a theatre company performs for an audience, the audience is a repository of experiences and stories that they do not usually share with the company and the performers. Arts marketing has focussed on understanding audience satisfaction (loyalty), but what is needed is a whole of company (artistic director, performers, marketing and management personnel) approach to accessing and listening to the authenticity statements that audiences make post- performance. Together such stories will deliver deep information about the intrinsic benefits and cultural impact of the work.

Conclusion

Audiences can describe their experience of a live performance. The description is usually in narrative form and links the experience to their expectations and values. The intrinsic value to an audience member of the artistic experience has the same impact as market value. Audiences will re-attend (that is, purchase a ticket to see another performance) if the intrinsic benefits match their personal quest for self-actualisation. This paper has shown that the described experiences of audiences fall into four indicators of that experience. Every story provided a narrative about the authenticity of the performance, the capacity of the audience member to take risk (artistic, social or financial), the place of knowledge and learning in the experience, and the relationship to other audience members. The in-depth stories that produced these indicators clearly demonstrate that audiences critically engage in live performance and use that engagement and experience to make a decision about re-attending.

As such 'hidden stories' are a valuable tool for performing arts companies in assessing their audience experience and if this experience can be captured, it would contribute significantly to the function of audience development in the live performing arts.

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