

untapped

the valued customer:

investigating brisbane audiences

Rebecca Scollen is currently conducting an audience reception study for La Boite Theatre Company. The primary aim is to expose participants' perceptions of La Boite's productions and discover their attitudes to theatre in general. Initial results have been valuable and it is expected that the complete study may aid the company in its artistic choices for the future. So far the participants are responding positively to the group discussion sessions and their understanding and appreciation of theatre has grown.

In order to know your audience and to understand what they think and feel about your productions it is undoubtedly a worthwhile exercise for theatre companies to actively seek this information. The plausible results are increased patronage and improved standing in the community. Like any customers theatre audiences are people spending hard earned money on a commodity they hope will be satisfying. How can theatre companies best serve the public if they have very little knowledge of who their audiences are (or are not), and their reactions to the theatrical event?

This is the role of audience reception studies: a field of research which places great importance on theatre audiences and their role in theatre. The question of who experiences what in a theatrical performance and why, was first asked in the 1920s and has since triggered a series of experiments to find out who constitutes an audience, (an exploration of audience demographics). However, the endeavour to find out what audiences experience and why (reception studies) is a totally different task, and has had considerably less attention paid to it over this century.

It is important for theatre companies to know what audiences experience and why they experience performances in the ways they do because this information can work as direct feedback to the director, cast and crew to inform them of whether they have communicated effectively to the public. The information can also better equip companies to make successful repertoire decisions when they discover what audiences like and what they are looking for in a production. After finding out why audiences experience productions in the ways they do, companies can re-evaluate the importance they place on certain aspects of their productions.

Based on an investigation of audience reception studies around the world and my own research, it is my contention that post performance group discussions are the best way to access the above information while at the same time creating confident, informed and appreciative audiences for the future. Talking about performances with a group of people who have shared a similar experience allows audience members to become comfortable with expressing their thoughts and feelings about productions. With practice this form of discussion also ensures audiences become more critical in their responses over time. By critiquing rather than simply attending the performance audiences experience a deeper understanding and appreciation of the theatrical event. Group discussions give audience members the chance to meet new people and learn from others by hearing different perspectives about the same performance. It is this created community that gives rise to confidence and awareness in audiences which can lead to a more informed and appreciative theatre going culture.

My current research focuses on the perceptions and reception of audience members in order to understand them better, while refining the methods applied to gather this information. These same methods, essentially the post performance group discussions, can also be utilised to ask questions directly related to marketing and publicity issues. In order to find out if your advertising is effective why not ask members of your target market for their response?

Many researchers believe the most effective way of discovering the perceptions of audience members is to simply ask them. A number of methods have been used to gain information from audiences after the event, including questionnaires and interviews. Closed or semi-controlled interviews allow the researcher to ask direct questions to gain the information she or he seeks. Open interviews are an attempt to allow the audience to speak freely about any topic or aspect of the performance they wish. Single interviews are a good way of clarifying what individuals experience, however, they limit the number of people the researcher can speak to at any given moment after the event. Group interviews allow many spectators to discuss the performance together as a group.

Group Interviews

Depending upon the aims of the group discussion, the researcher can play a strong moderator role asking direct questions of the group, or can play a limited role allowing the audience to raise issues and questions for themselves. The group interview allows the researcher to hear a number of perceptions in a short period of time, and become more aware of the differences between various sections of the community when comparing responses between groups. The discussion encourages individuals to rethink their ideas as they come in contact with others, and to question the opinions of other people in the group. A greater depth of thought then arises as individuals have to defend their perceptions and consider the opinions of others that they may have never conceived without the interaction.

The primary model utilised in the 1997 Pilot Study (discussed below) was directly influenced by the research of Sauter (and associates) conducted in 1986 in Stockholm. Sauter incorporated Theatre Talks as a method for retrieving the experiences of theatrical performances from small groups of audience members. His aim was to create an environment and interviewing style that was not unlike the situations audiences would normally be placed in after a performance. In order to achieve this ambition, audiences were taken to a comfortable, and informal setting, and were encouraged to talk amongst themselves about the performance they had seen; not unlike a group of friends having a coffee and chatting after a show.

Sauter believed this form of data collection was most suited to the qualitative and social nature of theatre and theatre goers. It is from Sauter's study that my research stems, with the hope of evaluating the worthiness or appropriateness of his model to Brisbane audiences when combined with other methodical approaches.

1997 Pilot Study

As part of a MA research degree at Queensland University of Technology I conducted a pilot study aiming to:

- 1) expose audience perceptions of five professional theatre productions in Brisbane;
- 2) test the methodology applied to gather and analyse the data relevant to the first inquiry.

In order to do this, questionnaires, individual interviews, diaries, and focus group discussion sessions were incorporated. The success of each method of data collection, in relation to popularity, validity and high collection rate, was monitored and assessed throughout the study. Audience perceptions were gauged via the responses of a small, non-representative sample that made up the audience component for the research. This group of six individuals consisted of three men and three women; one of each gender placed into three age categories of 20s, 30s - 40s, and 50+. All members were currently living in Brisbane, had diverse occupational backgrounds, and varying degrees of previous theatre going experience.

Their responses were recorded primarily through the use of focus group discussions. An adaptation of Lidstone's (1996) Synergetic Model for group interviewing was adopted with the researcher/ facilitator playing a supportive, yet passive role.

The proposed outcomes of the research were to give insight into the thoughts and feelings of six Brisbane audience members to five professional theatre productions, and to evaluate the methodology used to gain such responses. The results of the pilot study would then help to inform and define future theatre research to ensure that further exploration into the reception of theatre audiences in Brisbane continued.

Overall, the study was successful in gaining the perceptions of each group member to the five professional productions attended. The study also demonstrated some changes needed to be made to refine the data retrieval methods to lead to even more successful future studies. These changes have been made for the 1998 audience reception study I am currently conducting at La Boite Theatre Company.

The pilot study suggests that discussing performances as a group after the event, in an environment where individuals can meet new people and are encouraged to share opinions and perceptions with others, has the following effects:

- participants become more confident in verbally expressing their thoughts and feelings about performances;
- participants become more aware of other ways of understanding performances (via the comments of other participants);
- participants become more critical of and more open to new experiences;
- have fun with a group of people similar to themselves in a relaxed and safe environment.

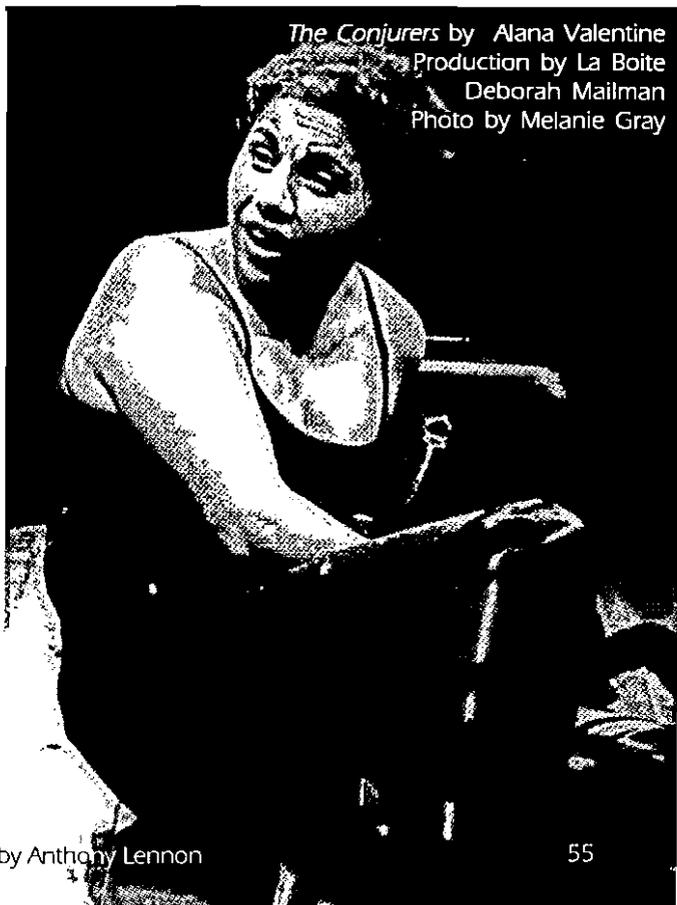
Early evidence from the pilot study suggests that the initial attending group will generate further subgroups, thus

building a substantial network of new attendees on the basis of developing familiarity, critical awareness, and self-confidence.

The questionnaire helped many of the group members to order their thoughts and refresh their memories before speaking as a group. Diaries were poorly received by the majority of the group because it believed it had said everything it needed to say at the group discussion. The follow-up interviews demonstrated that all members were willing to take part in a study of a similar nature in the future, and would encourage others to do so. All members had spoken to friends and family of their involvement in the study and of the performances they had attended. The group was now aware of smaller companies and venues in Brisbane, and stated it would now actively look for advertisements of future productions of such companies. Most group members were encouraged to attend productions in the future and to encourage others to do so as well.

The post performance group discussion is an excellent way to uncover information to aid theatre companies in their artistic and marketing decisions, and ensures the opportunity for audiences (or potential audiences) to meet and share their experiences with other theatre goers. These meetings provide audiences with an environment that encourages them to learn about theatre and to become more confident and critical in their responses to performance. This awareness in turn leads to a wave of interested and informed theatre goers eager to attend quality productions. If theatre companies listen to the thoughts and feelings of their audiences, and if audiences believe that their thoughts and feelings are of value to theatre companies, then a strong bond can develop and this two way communication can lead to exciting new prospects for our theatre industry's future.

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*The Conjurers by Alana Valentine
Production by La Boite
Deborah Mailman
Photo by Melanie Gray*