

*On the Record: An Account of
Regional Non-Theatre-goers'
Responses to a Selection of Plays
Toured to Northern Australia in
2004–05*

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When groups of regional non-theatre-goers experience a selection of plays and then report that most enjoyed them, could understand them, could relate to them, and would like to see more of them, the obvious questions to ask are: 'Why were they non-theatre-goers?' and 'How can we ensure that they now return?' This paper details regional non-theatre-goers' (or new audiences') reception of plays to demonstrate how theatre is perceived by the recently introduced. By better understanding new audiences and their reception of plays, more effective decisions can be made to impact on the creation of new work, the programming of seasonal repertoire, and the marketing of plays with this significant segment of the community in mind. Likewise, the non-theatre-goers' introduction to 'the world of theatre' enables them to directly experience live plays and to become more knowledgeable about what the theatre has to offer and how they might engage with it. 'By paying attention to audience needs and wants, we can learn how to provide entertainment experiences that are enriching and satisfying.'¹

Talking Theatre: An Audience Development Programme for Regional Queensland and the Northern Territory (2004–06)² was a three-year research project that sought to build new audiences for fourteen regional performing arts centres (PACs). All were members of the Northern Australia Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA).³ The Talking Theatre project gathered and analysed the reception of a sample of regional non-theatre-goers to a selection of performances presented in Queensland and in the Northern Territory in 2004 and 2005. The research also endeavoured to develop a profile of non-theatre-goers in regional areas; to understand their reasons for non-attendance; to identify their cultural and creative needs; and to discover their reactions to the PACs who presented them with a range of live performances to attend.

The Talking Theatre project was applied to PACs in northern Australia and to a selection of non-theatre-goers residing in the regions because, it was

argued, 'The future of the arts depends on finding new supporters/markets outside of current traditional support; e.g., non-theatre-goers and regional populations'.⁴ The Regional Audience Development Specialists (RADS) National Overview Report⁵ also stated the need for audience research and development within the performing arts sector in regional Australia. The RADS National Overview Report made a number of recommendations to improve regional arts organisations' engagement with their local communities. One of the key findings across the sector was that 'audience development objectives need[ed] to be considered in the planning of all programs and events'.⁶ Thus it was noted that many of the organisations operated from a product-centred viewpoint,⁷ focusing attention chiefly on the artworks rather than considering their audiences. This approach was reflected in the outcome of the Australia Council's New Audiences initiative in 2002.⁸ This national audience development funding scheme sought to support arts organisations in their endeavours to build new audiences. None of the successful proposals incorporated audience research and reception studies into their design to better understand audiences – or potential audiences – or to ascertain their attitudes or reactions to performance. Instead their strategies remained product-centred and publicity-focused. The Talking Theatre project's standpoint was that, in order to build new audiences, performing arts organisations needed to understand their target markets, and to discover how these markets experience the performing arts, before they could make appropriate decisions about disseminating advertising and choosing programming. The RADS National Overview Report stressed the point that '[regional] arts organisations that have developed works responsive to audience feedback and those with particular thematic relevance to the community are often successful'.⁹ As the 'top end' of Australia remains the nation's most regional, with half its population outside the metropolitan area, it was fitting to commence the Talking Theatre research project in Queensland and in the Northern Territory.

The sample

Local media and corporate email were utilised to inform the fourteen regional communities of the research and the need for participants. Twenty-four people from each region were sought to take part in the study. Members of the public interested in participating contacted the PACs directly to register their details. The potential participants were screened to check that they fitted the sample requirements; that is, that they were aged between eighteen and fifty-five years, lived in the local area, identified themselves as non-theatre-goers, and had not attended their local PAC before; if they had, it was understood to be a rare 'one-off' occasion. Although a wide range of people registered and participated in the research, the predominant demographic profile of the entire sample was female (67%), aged 30–49 years (55%), tertiary educated (50%), and earning \$20,000–\$50,000 (AUS) per annum

(46%). The sample also consisted mostly of active leisure-seekers who regularly spent time and money on dining out at restaurants (76%), going to the cinema (68%), engaging in family gatherings (60%), and exploring arts and crafts markets (57%).

The process

Each of the PACs selected three live performances for the participants to attend free of charge. They presented a mix of genres to provide the participants with variety – such as plays, opera, contemporary dance, stand-up comedy, musicals, ballet and orchestras. The selected twenty-four participants in each region were separated to form two groups of twelve who would attend each of the three performances together and take part in the three post-performance data-gathering sessions. Demographic and psychographic information was gathered about the non-theatre-goers via an ‘About You’ questionnaire that was sent to their homes and completed prior to their attendance at the first performance. Directly after experiencing each of the three performances, the participants individually completed a ‘Tonight’s Performance’ questionnaire, which asked them to rate their experiences of the show. After the participants completed the questionnaire, they talked together as a group about their reception of the performance. The post-performance group discussions were facilitated by the researcher; however, the facilitator played a passive role to encourage the participants to direct the topics of discussion and to interact with each other rather than answer a series of posed questions. The unstructured, free-flowing discussions generated substantial qualitative data that provided insight into the elements of performance and theatregoing that were important to new audiences. A few weeks after the final performance in the project, another questionnaire was sent to participants to complete. This ‘Feedback’ questionnaire was to gauge their assessment of the research, the PACs, and the likelihood of their future theatre attendance.

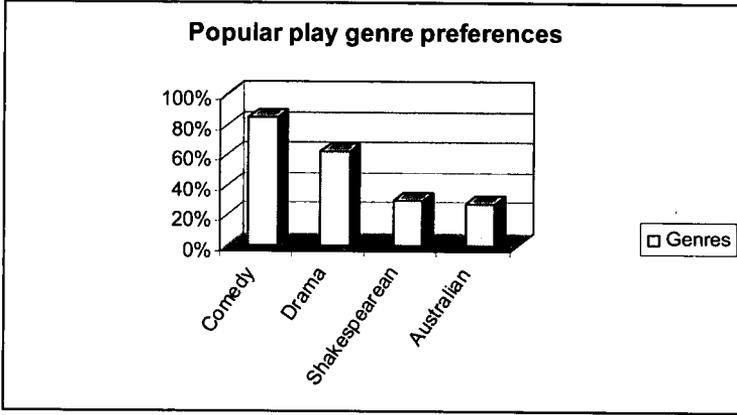
This paper presents some of the findings of the participants’ reception of the *plays* presented at the PACs in 2004 and 2005. Eleven of the participating PACs¹⁰ chose to include a play as one of their three performance offerings in the Talking Theatre project. In total, ten plays¹¹ were presented, with two of the plays each performed at two of the participating PACs. In all instances, the plays were part of a state or national tour to regional Queensland and to the Northern Territory. It should be noted that of all fourteen regions, only two had a professional theatre company in residence: Cairns and Darwin. Therefore, the only opportunity for most regional community members to attend live professional theatre is the toured – usually one-night-only – performances presented at the local PACs.

Play preferences prior to attendance

One of the questions in the 'About You' questionnaire asked the non-theatregoers to indicate if they had any preferences for live performance prior to attending any in the Talking Theatre project. Types of performance were separated into categories: theatre, music, dance and other. The most common preferences for theatre by the participants – in order of popularity – were Comedy, Drama, Shakespearean and Australian (see Graph 1). Eighty-five percent of the entire sample stated that they thought they would like to see a comedy. Gender, income, education and age appeared to be no barrier for this penchant for humour.¹² This result was not surprising, as the participants later stated in post-performance discussions that they liked to relax and have fun during their leisure time. Their familiarity with comedy as a genre, and their knowledge that it was usually light-hearted and easy to engage with, ensured that comic plays were the most popular across all regions. This finding aligned with Sauter's earlier Nordic audience reception study, where he discovered that 'Those who rarely visited the theatre tended to enjoy comedies and light entertainments ...'.¹³

Sixty-two percent of the sample stated that they would like to attend a drama. Unlike comedy, where it seemed that most participants regardless of gender, income, education and age were interested in this genre, drama attracted a 72% female audience – or 65% of all females in the project – and 40% were tertiary educated (undergraduate qualification) – or 90% of all participants in the project who were educated to this level. Seventeen percent of those wishing to see a drama earned over \$60,000 per annum, which equated to 70% of this income bracket overall. Thus it seemed that dramas were most appealing to highly educated, high income-earning women. Thirty percent of the participants wished to see a Shakespearean play. Again, a significant number of these people were women (74%) and tertiary educated (63%). Finally, 28% of the participants were interested in Australian plays. A different profile emerged here, with 70% of the participants earning \$10,000–\$35,000 per annum (or 47% of this income bracket overall), 53% aged 40–55 years (54% of this age grouping overall), and 25% educated to Year Ten schooling or less (53% of this qualification overall). Thus it seemed that Australian plays would appeal – more so than dramas and Shakespearean plays – to those in the community who were aged over forty years, were less highly educated and were earning lower annual incomes.

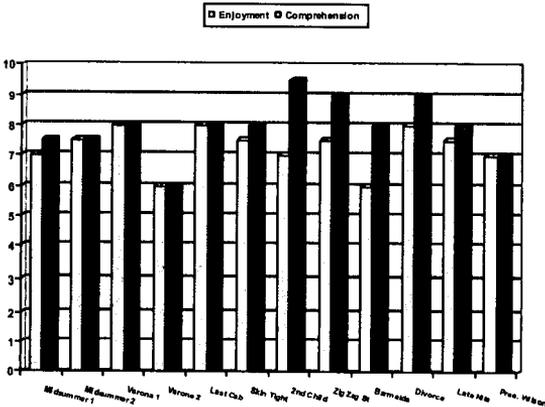
GRAPH 1: Preferences for theatre prior to attendance



As it turned out, the selection of plays in the project corresponded with one or more of the participants' top four theatre preferences.¹⁴ This finding reflected the publicly funded PACs' commitment to present live performances that aimed to be of interest to many in the local community.

Enjoyment and comprehension of the plays

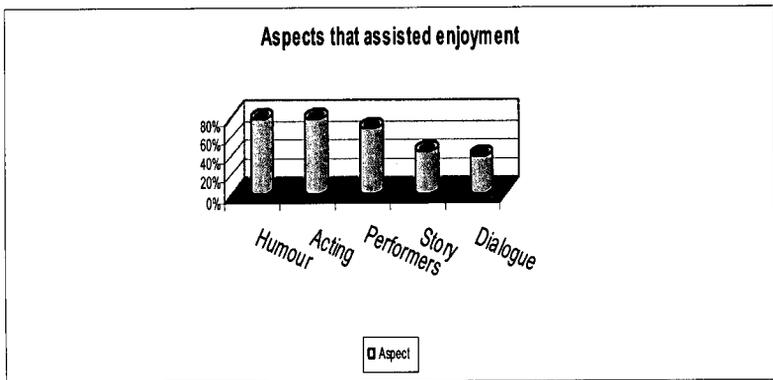
GRAPH 2: Enjoyment and comprehension ratings



Participants were asked to rate out of ten their levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the plays they attended. They were also to indicate the key

aspects in performance that helped them to enjoy and to understand the plays. These series of questions made up part of the 'Tonight's Performance' questionnaire which the participants completed immediately after attending the performances. The results suggested that overall the entire sample greatly enjoyed and understood the plays that they attended. Graph 2 illustrates the average ratings of enjoyment and comprehension of the participants for each play. After calculating the average ratings across the entire sample, all the plays achieved a rating of seven out of ten for enjoyment and eight for comprehension. The most commonly stated aspects in performance that best assisted enjoyment and comprehension of the plays are highlighted in Graph 3 and Graph 4.

GRAPH 3: Best aspects for enjoyment

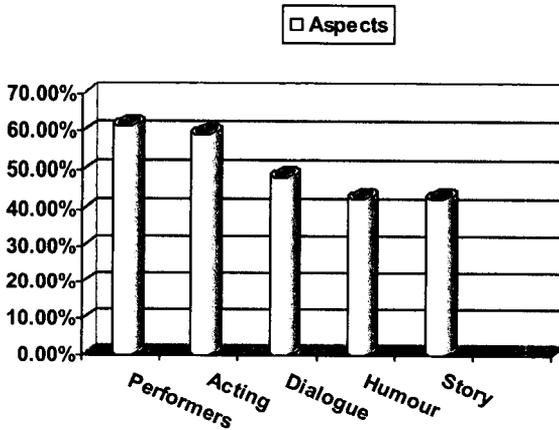


The most popular aspects in performance that assisted the participants' enjoyment of all ten plays were, in order of most common: the humour, the acting, the performers, the story and the dialogue. The very high percentage of the sample that enjoyed the humour corresponded closely with the participants' preferences for comedy and enjoyable leisure time. It also likely reflected the prevalence of humorous content in the majority of the plays.¹⁵ The acting and the performers were important in creating enjoyment because they helped to bring the stories, issues and characters to life for the participants. They noted in discussion that the live nature of the acting made the plays more absorbing and real. The strong focus on the stories and dialogue was in keeping with the narrative-driven plays presented. Stories and dialogue that reflected real life and that encouraged the audiences to engage their imaginations were particularly enjoyed:

I found myself sort of drawn in because they were talking about those kinds of emotions and that, and the way they were feeling and how things were going from bad to worse for this bloke.

And you could relate to that in a way that you can't relate if you were say, watching something like that on the telly. Because they're up there, they're there, they're real people doing real things. They just seemed a lot more believable, even though you know they're up on stage ... acting.¹⁶

GRAPH 4: Best aspects for comprehension



The most popular aspects in performance that assisted the participants' comprehension of all ten plays were, in order: the performers, the acting, the dialogue, the humour, and the story – the same five aspects that were the most useful for creating enjoyment, albeit in a significantly different order. The finding that the performers and their actions best helped the sample to enjoy and to understand the plays demonstrated their very strong role in theatrical communication for new audiences. It also illustrated that the actors were central to a performance because it was their actions in the space and their delivery of the dialogue that informed the new audiences of the fiction and engaged their attention throughout. These two aspects, combined with dialogue, humour and story, showed that new audiences seemed primarily to focus on the people on stage – actions, vocals, appearance – and the narrative – story, dialogue, humour – to understand and to enjoy plays.¹⁷

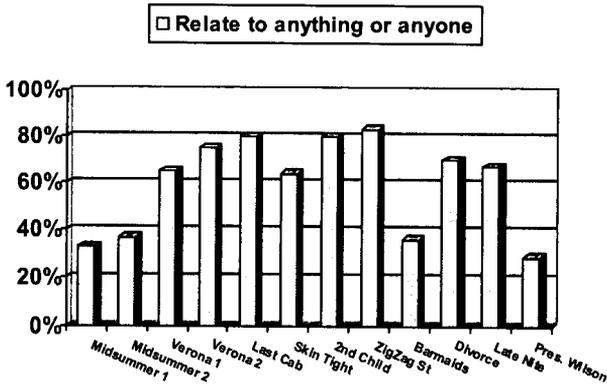
Although most participants enjoyed and understood the plays, not all did: 11% of those who attended a play had difficulty enjoying it. These participants gave an enjoyment rating of four or less out of ten. Although they were unable to enjoy the plays, 66% of these participants indicated that they understood them to a reasonable or high degree. However, for the 6% of participants who had difficulty understanding a play – provided a rating of

four or less for comprehension – 80% of them stated that they did not enjoy the plays. Therefore, it appears that audience comprehension was vital if plays were to be enjoyed, but this essential element was not solely responsible for creating enjoyment.

Ability to relate to the plays

The participants were asked to indicate if they could relate to anyone or to anything in the plays. On average across the sample and across all plays, 60% of the participants stated that they could relate to something.¹⁸ However, this sample average varied quite dramatically when the average percentages specific to the individual plays were examined (see Graph 5). It was found that there was a very high percentage of participants who could relate to *Zigzag Street* (83%), *Last Cab to Darwin* (80%), and *Second Childhood* (80%). There was also a considerably lower percentage of participants who could relate to something in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1) (33%) and (2) (37%), *Barmaids* (36%), and *President Wilson in Paris* (29%). Examination of the aspects in performance that the participants could relate to uncovered that characters and the relationships between them were consistently cited across the sample. The exceptions were *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Barmaids* and *President Wilson in Paris*, where few participants stated that they could relate to the characters and relationships. Thus, it appeared that new audiences were likely to relate to plays that contained characters and relationships that were similar to those they experienced in their personal lives. *Zigzag Street*, *Last Cab to Darwin* and *Second Childhood* presented issues, dilemmas, triumphs and places that could be readily recognised as Australian, suburban and regional, as well as pertaining to the personal.¹⁹ This finding aligns with Terracini's claim that,

If we are to connect in a real way with significant audiences we must be attuned to the issues, the joys and the fundamentals of the people who we wish to be included in our theatre-making process. That means creating work which is not only about national issues, but work which is about suburban issues, about issues in regional towns, about the issues that affect us individually and which are reflective of the different cultures which make up our society.²⁰

GRAPH 5: Ability to relate to the plays

The finding that almost two-thirds of the entire sample could relate to something or someone in the plays was important. The majority had indicated in the initial post-performance group discussions that they had believed that theatregoing was an elitist activity. This made them concerned that they would have difficulty engaging with the performances and would not fit in with the other theatre patrons. For instance, one young, well-educated, high-income-earning male participant commented: 'I always thought [theatre] was for cigar-smoking old people', and many participants explained that they assumed that children would not be welcome in this perceived formal adult leisure environment. The finding that 60% of the sample could relate to aspects in the plays demonstrated that they were not created for one particular (elitist) segment of the community, as the varied non-theatregoers had feared. Instead, this indicated that the cultures represented on stage were not that different from those of the individual non-theatregoers.

Post-performance group discussion findings

As part of the coding process of the qualitative data for analytic purposes, the participant comments in the post-performance group discussions were categorised as Positive, Negative, and Providing Further Detail About Key Aspects in the plays. It quickly emerged that similar aspects in performance were discussed across the sample and across the plays in the regions. These common discussion points were in keeping with the most common individual responses given in the 'Tonight's Performance' questionnaires. Therefore, the aspects in the plays that were regularly referred to by the sample indicated the most important elements in theatrical performance for new audiences.

The most discussed aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about positively were, in order: the performers and the acting, the humour, the aspects that could be related to, the sets, particular scenes or moments in the plays, and the story. Participants gave direct examples from the performances to help them to explain why they felt positively about these aspects. The performers and the acting were mentioned many times in discussion, because the participants were impressed with the skill and presence of the performers. This finding reflects Sayre and King's assertion that 'The experience of being in the presence of performers is what drives audiences to attend live performances'.²¹ Regular comments were made about the actors, such as: they could remember all of their lines, had good vocality, were expressive, and had great comic timing. They were physical and energetic, highly professional, and had excellent use of facial expression and body movement in relation to character. They used doubling and direct address to great effect, and they helped to bring the story and characters to life. They were real, up close and believable. Importantly, many appeared to enjoy themselves while acting. When the participants thought the actors were enjoying themselves, they enjoyed their performances more thoroughly.

I think there were so many strong parts to it and I really enjoyed it ... But I think the person I liked the most was the comedic actor; the one that we mentioned before, the one with the schoolboy cap. I thought his timing was really great and his expression was great and he could just make you laugh, just by pulling a face. He was just really good. I thought so many of the actors were strong but he stayed with me because I just thought, you know, he made things that really would have been nothing on paper into a really entertaining piece.²²

Although not all of the plays were comedies, they did all contain comic elements or moments. The new audiences' penchant for humour ensured that this was an aspect that was discussed at some length. The types of comedy – such as black humour; casual, light-hearted humour; witty humour; controversial and/or topical humour – and examples of their presence in the plays were mentioned. Specific performers and moments or scenes in performance were highlighted as fine examples of humour. For some, the humour helped to 'take the edge off' shocking or depressing issues, while for others, the humour was itself shocking.

It was a fairly dark sort of a performance and a bit depressing but I really enjoyed it all the same. A lot of that's a result of the humour and I guess they broke that up too so, there was some quite bizarre performances in there, particularly the tidy town bits, which seemed very playful when you think about it. It probably was just to break it up for us so that you could

concentrate. And also the contrast of emotions made it more effective.²³

As stated earlier, many of the participants were able to relate to aspects in the plays. It was common for them to share with each other the moments, characters or issues that they could relate to their own experiences. They would explain that part of their enjoyment was to recognise characters as people that they knew in real life. The plays seemed more realistic, accurate, believable, and thus more engaging, because the participants could relate to aspects in them.

I just liked the whole play. I could relate to just about everything in it. I like watching things and reading things where I know the places that they're talking about. Like, if it's in my local area, rather than some American thing, in the States or a town that's unheard of.²⁴

Although many of the participants did not indicate in the 'Tonight's Performance' questionnaire that the sets helped them to enjoy or understand the plays, this aspect was discussed regularly after viewing the performances. The participants appreciated the ways in which the sets portrayed locations, were used in multiple ways to indicate different places and things, and were changed by the cast and crew quickly and seamlessly in view of the audience. They also frequently spoke about the simplicity of the sets and the need to use imagination because of this. Through their symbolic design, the sets in some of the plays also informed the participants about the characters and their relationships with each other.

The way her dress and the sofa all blended in together, it was really sort of weird because at first I wondered, 'Why are they doing that?' I don't study psychology or symbolism really ... well starting into symbolism ... whatever, but I was watching it and it was really interesting how she blended into everything. Then later on when I watched I thought to myself, 'They did that because she faded into the background, out of sight, out of mind' and it was like so symbolic of her later on when she started standing up for herself. Well you thought she was going to stand up for herself but she gave in to that loser in the end

...²⁵

Special scenes or moments in the plays that were significant to the participants were discussed after the performances. In particular, participants shared their reception of the times which were very funny, were moving, were identified with, were excellent examples of fine acting, or were key times when the messages or issues of the plays were put forward. The discussions also concerned particular moments that were not understood and others within the group would explain their interpretations of the scenes.

I thought it was well rounded, I thought the acting was brilliant. Especially at the end when she was lying with the doctor and she [the actor] made it look like she had someone there with her.²⁶

The stories presented in the plays were a common feature of the post-performance discussions. Participants would talk about how the stories related to real life, were fun, intriguing or political. The structure would be discussed when the play contained a non-linear narrative or when a series of small, seemingly unrelated stories came together to make one large statement. Participants also spoke about the modern telling of old stories and if they found the stories easy to understand. In some cases the stories were considered too simple, which made the plays less enjoyable. As a Mackay participant said of *President Wilson in Paris*, 'I thought the storyline was quite intriguing trying to figure out what was going on. It intrigued me to see what was happening.'

The most discussed negative aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about were (in order of frequency): the elements that made the plays difficult to understand; the slow-moving, long and repetitive nature of some of the plays; offensive content; and comedy that was considered not to be funny. Again, the participants gave direct examples from the performances to help them to explain why they felt negatively about these aspects. When participants had difficulty understanding what was going on in a play, this became dissatisfying to them. They would use the time after the performance to share their dissatisfaction with the others and to ask them to explain the aspects that they could not understand. Mostly the difficulty some participants encountered concerned the language used in the plays. The Shakespearean plays were wordy, spoken quickly, and were in 'Old English' – all of which made it hard for some to comprehend what was being said. Other times the language was not understood because the actors rushed the dialogue and their pronunciation was unclear, or because the participants were seated a long way from the stage and could not hear what was said. Difficulty understanding also occurred due to the structure of the plays (such as non-linear narrative), the clash of modern and traditional (in the Shakespearean plays), the simple sets which offered few clues, and the confusing relationships between characters. Those participants who could not relate to anything in the plays also found it hard to comprehend what was going on.

But the fighting, they're best of friends, the fighting ... He put the knife in her mouth, what was going on with that? Is he going to kill her? What's going on here? Is she going to stab him? I just lost it.²⁷

Some of the plays – or moments within them – were considered to be slow-moving, too long and repetitive. This made them seem boring, predictable and tiring to some of the participants, who would mention moments or

characters or plots that they thought 'dragged on'. Some explained that they were accustomed to faster-paced entertainment and they had to consciously wind down to try to suit the rhythm of the plays.

It wasn't my cup of tea. I lost it half way through. I just said 'Where's it going?' The lack of props just ... it just seemed too slow, no vibrancy, no colour to keep your senses alive to keep enjoying the show.²⁸

If participants were offended by something in the plays, they would voice their concerns to their peers in the discussions. This would often lead to debate, as not all were offended. Those who were expressed their disappointment, surprise and disgust that the plays would publicly present that kind of content. Offensive content consisted of swearing, distasteful humour, sex scenes, and women objectified by wearing skimpy clothing.

I didn't particularly enjoy seeing some of those scenes which depicted a sexual act. Call me a prude or whatever, I don't know. But yeah, that kind of put me off, especially because I thought Shakespeare was something that kids study at school. Probably a lot of parents brought their kids, because I know my daughter has done a Shakespeare book at school recently. I thought about bringing her because I thought it would be a good experience and having studied that at school, and I'm glad I didn't bring her, to be honest. Because you know, not that my kids don't know about sex, but I don't think that was appropriate for a Shakespeare play, myself personally.²⁹

Many of the plays were promoted as comedies and, as such, a significant number of the sample expected them to be funny. However, in some cases the jokes were not considered amusing and this lessened the participants' enjoyment. Individual taste dictated whether the plays were believed to be funny. A Darwin participant said, of *Last Cab to Darwin*, 'Bestiality is offensive and I don't think it's funny under any circumstances. Nor rape, nor incest is funny in any circumstance.'

The most discussed 'neither negative nor positive' aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about in detail were: the central issues or message of the plays; their expectations prior to attendance; recognition of actors, songs, storylines; and other popular media that aspects in the plays reminded them of. Issues such as adultery, domestic violence, euthanasia, IR reforms, Aboriginal rights, youth, love, and respect for oneself were spoken about. The participants would usually relate these – and other subjects – to their personal experiences or beliefs.

It showed that quite often in some jobs, or quite a lot of jobs, that you're at the whim of a type of manager that doesn't respect your experience. And these women obviously have been around

a long time doing this job, as much as it wouldn't be my ideal but you know, at the end of the day they had to leave and there was no sympathy there, no hand out, no redundancy, anything like that.³⁰

The participants would note whether the plays met their expectations. In many cases, the plays were more enjoyable than expected or were different to how they thought they would be. The sets were usually simpler, there were fewer actors, and the live nature of the performances was highly absorbing.

I mean I came thinking it is going to be directed ... probably at a younger audience. But I didn't know the story, but I mean I knew ... my kids were reading his [Morris Gleitzman's] books when they were ten so I knew that would be the audience that he catered for, so I guess I didn't have any expectations that it would be an adult play. I thought that it would be for young kids.³¹

If the participants recognised, from past experience, an actor or other aspects in performance, they would take pleasure in mentioning this to the others. Recognition added authority to their reception of the plays. It also added to their enjoyment of the performances. At times, elements in the plays reminded some of them of other art forms that they had previously encountered, such as novels, television programmes, music and films. This helped them to relate to the plays and also added extra meaning to the performance as they compared it with the original source they were more familiar with.

It was great, really enjoyable. I was expecting something good because Henri Szeps was in it and I remember him from *Mother and Son* and I know that actors with a reputation generally only choose good shows, so I thought it would be a good show because of that and I really enjoyed it.³²

I don't know if it was intentional but that music I think was from *American Beauty*, that sort of ... I don't know if anyone's seen that, but that's sort of about him facing the end as well.³³

Attitude and future attendance

After attending the performances in the Talking Theatre project, the sample was sent a 'Feedback' questionnaire to complete at home and return to the researcher. Of the 53% of the entire sample who elected to complete and return the questionnaire, 47% indicated they were now interested in attending plays in the future. Of particular note was the finding that the desire to now attend plays outweighed the other more popular live performance genres, such as musicals and live music concerts – as was previously indicated in the results of the initial 'About You' questionnaire and in the early post-performance group discussions. It was also found via the responses to the

'Feedback' questionnaire that, during the year (either 2004 or 2005) of participation in the research, 18% of the sample attended at least one play outside of study conditions – at the local PAC or elsewhere. These participants were accompanied by a partner, friends or family who were not in the Talking Theatre project. These findings demonstrated that the combination of direct introduction to the plays, as well as the time afterwards to discuss them with their peers, ensured that this art form was more positively regarded after attendance than before. Not only were the non-theatregoers now paying to see plays, but they were bringing other non-theatregoers with them.

The significant levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the plays, combined with the participants' willingness to attend other plays now and into the future, were important and suggested direct ramifications for the PACs involved in the research as well as for the theatre industry more generally. In the past, all of the participating regional PACs have had difficulty selling tickets to plays. The limited box office sales meant that many of the PACs were planning to reduce the number of plays they presented during their annual season of performances. Some were considering removing all plays from the repertoire and replacing them with more popular types of performance. The finding that the new audiences enjoyed the plays and were keen to attend more in the future went against the trend that the PACs had become accustomed to.

The participant responses given immediately after engaging with the plays pointed to at least one of the key reasons why plays did not traditionally sell well in the regions. For people who did not normally attend the theatre and did not have substantial knowledge about plays and theatregoing, there did not appear to be a lot of information readily available about upcoming plays to increase their interest and expectations. According to the sample, most were aware the plays were on but knew very little else about them. Upon attending the plays in this project, the majority found that they really enjoyed them and had little trouble understanding them. They were able to communicate their reception of the plays and their experiences of what it was like to 'go to the theatre'. Yet in most cases, they did not observe this kind of information in the local media and other outlets prior to their attendance. These particulars would have provided the insight for new audiences to anticipate what to expect from the plays and from theatregoing, and thus would have helped to encourage their patronage. Therefore, according to these non-theatregoers, the PACs must attempt to provide sufficient information about the plays – including storylines, characters, and the aspects that the community will likely relate to or identify with – to build expectation and willingness to attend. They also need to highlight the friendly and social environment at the PACs to inform the community about what it is like to be a theatregoer. For touring theatre companies, it is vital that they provide detailed information about their plays to the regional PACs well in advance

of the performances, including stimulating visuals from live recorded footage and photographs. This way, local PAC staff will be able to select and actively promote the pertinent elements in the plays that will best reflect their individual communities and so create stronger interest and attract greater patronage.

In summary, the Talking Theatre research findings illustrated that non-theatre-goers were more than capable of enjoying and understanding live plays. This result indicated to them that it was likely that they would enjoy and understand theatre performances if they elected to purchase tickets in the future. Some had already taken the initiative and begun attending plays during 2004 or 2005. For the PACs, the result showed that their current theatre programming was satisfactory because the plays were enjoyed and understood by the majority of the non-theatre-goers in the research. This suggested that their programming decisions were appropriate and that their programming practices did not need to be significantly altered when designing a theatre season with the new market of non-theatre-goers in mind. Instead greater investment in marketing the plays and educating the public about the overall theatre-going experience was required to boost audience numbers. It also appeared that they should continue to present plays to the regions, because when attended they were enjoyed and were relevant to many in the sample.

For the theatre industry more generally, the findings derived from the reception study demonstrated that non-theatre-goers were not particularly different to theatre-goers; they were able to employ sufficient skills of interpretation and engagement. This result showed that those making theatre should not be tempted to over-simplify or to sanitise performances in the hope of creating work that is pleasurable and comprehensible to non-theatre-goers. Instead, the participants' consistent attention to, and appreciation of, the performers and their actions, combined with their fascination with the live nature of the performances, indicated the aspects of theatre to be prioritised when creating or presenting plays with new audiences in mind. The results showed that theatre companies should continue to attempt to tell stories that are relevant to people's lives and that are expressed by highly skilled and charismatic performers.

The Talking Theatre project is just one example of how undertaking reception studies benefits all theatre stakeholders. The information generated – of which only a slice has been presented here – creates insight into how non-theatre-goers (or new audiences) interpret and engage with plays. This supplies clues not only about how new audiences respond to performance and to theatre-going, but also about how theatre communicates to them and the implications this has for future creation and promotion of work. In addition, research such as this becomes a vital record of how a selection of community members engaged with a play at a particular time and place in history. At a

time when reviews of plays are almost non-existent in the regions, audience reception studies can reveal to all what ordinary people thought and felt about the play they attended in their home town.

NOTES

- 1 Shay Sayre and Cynthia King, *Entertainment and Society: Audiences, Trends, and Impacts* (California: SAGE Publications, 2003) 65.
- 2 The research was funded by the Commonwealth Government's Australian Research Council; the Northern Australia Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA); the State and Territory Government Arts funding agencies Arts Queensland and Arts Northern Territory; and the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. The QUT chief investigators working on the Talking Theatre project were Dr Jacqueline Martin, Assoc. Prof. Jennifer Radbourne, Assoc. Prof. Brad Haseman, and Dr Rebecca Scollen.
- 3 NARPACA is a large regional theatre network formed in 1983 as an administrative support group focused on the activities and requirements of regional PACs throughout northern Australia. The great distances between the individual PACs and between northern Australia and the nation's southern states – where much of the resources for the arts are located – meant that this network was vital in overcoming isolation and invisibility. Today NARPACA also operates as a powerful lobby that presides over a touring circuit of immense value. The fourteen participating PACs are situated in towns or cities that range in population from 9,000 to 200,000. The locales vary from tropical, sub-tropical, hinterland, grassland and desert, with a plethora of industries; e.g., rural, mining, manufacturing, education, health and tourism. Each publicly owned PAC differs in size (venue, seating capacity, staffing and funding), which directly impacts on theatre programming, marketing and promotion, and audience research and development.
- 4 Woolcott Research Pty Ltd, *Australians and the Arts* (Sydney: Australia Council, 2000) 19.
- 5 Regional Arts Australia, *Regional Audience Development Specialists Program: Report to the Australia Council for the Arts* (Port Adelaide: Regional Arts Australia, 2002). The RADS Program (2000–02) was a federally supported national research investigation into regional audience development.
- 6 *Ibid.* 34.
- 7 Ruth Rentschler, ed., *Innovative Arts Marketing* (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999) 3.
- 8 Australia Council for the Arts (2002), *New Audiences 2002: Assessment Report*, <http://www.ozco.gov.au/audience/newaud.html>
- 9 Regional Arts Australia 27.
- 10 Darwin Entertainment Centre, Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Townsville Civic Theatre, Caloundra Cultural Centre, Ipswich Civic Hall, Mount Isa Civic Centre, Nambour Civic Centre, Mackay Entertainment Centre, Araluen Centre in Alice Springs, Cairns Civic Theatre, and Pilbeam Theatre in Rockhampton.

- 11 *Last Cab to Darwin* (Darwin); *Skin Tight* (Toowoomba); *Second Childhood* (Townsville); *Zigzag Street* (Caloundra); *Barmaids* (Ipswich); *My Brilliant Divorce* (Mount Isa); *Late Nite Catechism* (Nambour); *President Wilson in Paris* (Mackay); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Alice Springs and Townsville); and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Cairns and Rockhampton).
- 12 There was an even distribution across these four categories of participants seeking comedy.
- 13 Wilmar Sauter, 'Theatre Talks: Or How to Find Out What the Spectator Thinks', *Nordic Theatre Studies: Advances in Reception and Audience Research* 5 (1986): 145.
- 14 *Last Cab to Darwin*: Australian Comedy/Drama; *Skin Tight*: Australian Drama; *Second Childhood*: Australian Children's Drama; *Zigzag Street*: Australian Comedy; *Barmaids*: Australian Comedy; *My Brilliant Divorce*: Comedy; *Late Nite Catechism*: Australian Comedy; *President Wilson in Paris*: Comedy/Drama; *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Shakespearean Romantic Comedy; and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: Shakespearean Romantic Comedy.
- 15 The regional PACs tended to present plays that were comedies or contained humorous moments in their endeavours to reach as wide an audience as possible.
- 16 Caloundra participant, *Zigzag Street*.
- 17 Other aspects such as set, lighting, costume, and sound/music appeared to have limited impact on enjoyment and understanding for the sample. This was likely partly due to the often simple staging of the plays, on account of the practicalities of state and national touring. However, it also pointed to the priorities in performance for new audiences with no background in attending plays.
- 18 Some 70% of those who could relate to the plays were women, which accounted for 60% of all women in the project. Thirty-two percent were aged 30–39, which represented 49% of this age group overall. Twenty-two percent were aged 20–29, which was 70% of this age group. Twenty-two percent were aged 40–49, which represented 60% of this age group. Forty-six percent were tertiary-educated (undergraduate qualification), which accounted for 61% of those participants educated to this degree in the project. Thirty-five percent earned \$35,000–\$50,000 per annum, which equated to 72% of this income bracket overall.
- 19 *Zigzag Street*: 'Richard is 28, single, and living in the house his grandparents built on Zigzag Street (Brisbane). Despite concerted efforts to get his life together, chaos reigns supreme. In between taking bad but well-meaning advice from his friend Jeff, taking his toaster apart to find exactly what it is that is giving the toast a slightly odd taste, and explaining the absence of his girlfriend to the local takeaway store, Richard's life meanders back on track. He even discovers that hope wasn't such an overly-optimistic emotion after all.' <http://www.nickearls.com/zigzag.html>
Last Cab to Darwin: 'Last Cab To Darwin is based on the true story of Broken Hill taxi driver, Max Bell, who, in the early 90s, was diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer. Max decides to end his life with dignity and take advantage of the voluntary euthanasia law which is in bitter dispute in the Northern Territory

Parliament. Undeterred, Max sells up everything he owns, says goodbye to his beloved neighbour Polly, and drives the 3,000 kilometres to Darwin. We follow Max's journey up the dead heart of Australia where he encounters a host of bizarre and beautiful outback characters. His hopes of becoming the first person in history to take advantage of the 'Rights Of The Terminally Ill Act' are crushed when the law is overturned by Federal Parliament. We then follow Max's desperate bid to return to Broken Hill to be with his beloved Polly.' <http://www.ozscript.org/html/scripts/lastcab.htm>

Second Childhood: 'A funny and moving story, *Second Childhood* is about a group of kids who discover that, rather than being nobodies, they are in fact reincarnations of all sorts of people: from Phar Lap, to nurse Elizabeth Kenny, to explorer and settler John Batman. With a renewed sense of purpose the friends are spurred on to take up a fight with unscrupulous developers who are about to demolish their local fun park for an entertainment and gaming venue. From feeling like nobodies to discovering they are all indeed somebodies, *Second Childhood* will inspire everyone.' http://www.hothousetheatre.com.au/pub_news

- 20 Lyndon Terracini, 'The Culture of Place: Making Australian Theatre', *Australasian Drama Studies* 48 (2006): 23.
- 21 Sayre and King 243.
- 22 Rockhampton participant, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.
- 23 Darwin participant, *Last Cab to Darwin*.
- 24 Caloundra participant, *Zigzag Street*.
- 25 Cairns participant, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.
- 26 Mount Isa participant, *My Brilliant Divorce*.
- 27 Toowoomba participant, *Skin Tight*.
- 28 Toowoomba participant, *Skin Tight*.
- 29 Alice Springs participant, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
- 30 Ipswich participant, *Barmaids*.
- 31 Townsville participant, *Second Childhood*.
- 32 Mackay participant, *President Wilson in Paris*.
- 33 Darwin participant, *Last Cab to Darwin*.

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