

**Title**

*Bridging the divide: regional performing arts centres and non-theatre-goers introduced*

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## **Author Bio**

Dr Rebecca Scollen manages Artsworx in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland. Prior to this appointment in late 2006, Rebecca completed a three-year Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship where she operated as primary researcher and trainer for the *Talking Theatre* project. Before taking on this role Rebecca taught in the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology. She also ran a successful audience research, reception and development consultancy in Queensland.

*Bridging the Divide:*

*Regional performing arts centres and non-theatre-goers introduced*

Abstract

The *Talking Theatre* project (2004-2006) was an audience development initiative implemented in regional Queensland and in the Northern Territory in Australia. The project sought to assist performing arts centres to better engage with their local communities and to build new audiences for the future. The research aimed to understand non-theatre-goers; their reasons for non-attendance, their perspectives about theatre-going culture, and their reactions to a range of live performances they experienced under study conditions. A series of questionnaires and post-performance discussion groups generated extensive quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to non-theatre-goers and their reception of theatre-going. Findings indicated that key deterrents to attendance (ticket price, parenting responsibilities, low quality performances, and work commitments) were outcomes of a larger barrier to theatre-going: fear of the unknown. Participation in the research resulted in return patronage of participants and their families/friends confirming that social interaction and peer recommendation is vital to becoming a theatre-goer.

## Introduction

Theatre is commonly understood to play a significant role in the presentation and development of cultures. What if some individuals, however, do not recognise Theatre as an interface to their cultures? What if Theatre does not communicate or interact with all members of the public? Does Theatre then become a restricted interface, which only channels particular understandings of the world to those who also hold these worldviews? Or is there simply a breakdown in communication between Theatre and non-theatre-goers, which prevents both entities from successfully engaging?

For many people in Australian society, theatre-going is not an activity they wish to pursue. It would seem that the cultures that Theatre represent, examine, and challenge are not perceived to be their own. Even Turner (in Schechner & Appel, 1990: 1) admits that, “A (theatrical) performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures.” Shevtsova (1993: ix) also indicates that Theatre “...is created out of the behaviours, emotions and values that are invested in the images and symbols appropriate to a particular social group.” The prevalence of middle-aged, well-educated, high-income earners attending the Theatre could indicate that these ‘particular cultures’ uttered in performance pertain solely to these people. Theorists such as Kant (1794) and Bourdieu (1986) have certainly argued that Theatre (amongst other publicly-funded cultural institutions) composes ‘the field of restricted culture’ and can only successfully be experienced and appreciated by those with ‘taste’ (Schwartz, 1997: 166-167). Or in other words, those who have the “...interpretative, intellectual and aesthetic skills...” (Bennett *et al.* 1999: 230) available to a selected minority via the education system and the family.

International research has certainly shown that the greater one’s education the more likely one is to attend the arts (McCarthy *et al.* 2004; Australia Council, 2000; Kotler & Scheff, 1997). In Australia it is estimated that tertiary educated citizens are 194% more likely to participate in the arts than those with primary schooling (Bennett, 1999: 232). Interestingly, a 1985 study (Kotler & Scheff, 1997) in Cleveland, USA, found that those who had an arts education as children were more likely to attend as

adults than those who did not, but only if their friends attended too. Although they were educated in the arts and had been introduced to Theatre in the past, very few were willing to attend without their peers present. This indicated the need for one's actions to be confirmed by the corresponding actions of those one respects. It seems Bourdieu's (1986) claim that family was also important in the creation of taste and automatic entry to restricted culture could be argued to still hold true today, albeit if interpreted a little more widely than he had in mind.

As family and peers are closest to us they are likely to have the most impact on our actions and perceptions. Roberts argues (1972 in Bennett, *et al.*, 1981: 277) "...the family's influence upon leisure derives from its pivotal position in structuring the public's social networks." By taking into account the ways in which the family acts we can assess the ways in which we should act, and vice versa. According to Charon (1992: 146) "Social action...means that other people are very important to what we do. It means that they are social objects and therefore guide our action." The ways that our family and peers understand things in the world, such as Theatre, are a direct result of interaction they have had with other people. In turn, our interaction with family and peers creates meanings about Theatre for us, and on it goes. Littlejohn (1992: 173) explains that "Whatever meaning a person possesses for a thing is the result of interaction with others about the object being defined. An object has no meaning for a person apart from the interaction with other humans." Therefore, it could be argued that social interaction and familial/peer influence may be more integral than wealth and education as factors leading to theatre attendance and cultural engagement.

### **The *Talking Theatre* project as conduit**

#### **a) Research partners, goals and design**

*Talking Theatre: An audience development programme for regional Queensland and the Northern Territory* (2004-2006) was a three year research project funded by the Australian Research Council, Northern Australian Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA), Arts Queensland, Arts Northern Territory, and the Queensland University of Technology.

The *Talking Theatre* project sought to build new audiences both in the short and long term for the fourteen regional performing arts centres (PACs) associated with the project<sup>1</sup>. The research endeavoured to develop a profile of non-theatre-goers in regional areas, to understand their reasons for non-attendance, and to discover their reactions to live performances, and to the PACs who presented them.

The research design sought to enable non-theatre-goers living in regional Queensland and the Northern Territory to directly experience three live performances in a theatre setting. It also provided the context for the non-theatre-goers to interact with other non-theatre-goers participating in the research as they attended the theatres together and discussed their reception together after each performance. One of the central beliefs of the research design was that the combination of direct experience with theatrical performances and participation in post-performance discussions with peers would grow non-theatre-goers' awareness of, interest in and confidence to engage with theatre in the future. The opportunity to personally engage with theatrical performances would enable the creation of meaning for each individual. For the participants to then immediately share their perspectives with others (who were perceived to be similar to themselves as they all identified as non-theatre-goers) would help to confirm their ideas or to add to them. Times for self-reflection and consideration of reactions by peers would further thought about live performance and attendance and thus increase the likelihood of future theatre-going.

The research design also enabled the participants to air their views knowing that their feedback would be given to the staff at the PACs to consider and potentially learn from. It was believed that this would assist the non-theatre-goers to feel valued by the PACs and concurrently help the PACs to be in a stronger position to make effective decisions to positively impact on other interested non-theatre-goers in their communities. Information gathered from the participants would provide insight into non-attenders' attitudes toward programming, pricing, facilities, and promotion. A professional development component of the *Talking Theatre* project also sought to

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<sup>1</sup> Araluen Centre in Alice Springs, Darwin Entertainment Centre, Cairns Civic Theatre, Mackay Entertainment Centre, Townsville Civic Theatre, Burdekin Theatre in Ayr, World Theatre in Charters Towers, Mount Isa Civic Centre, Pilbeam Theatre in Rockhampton, Nambour Civic Centre, Caloundra Cultural Centre, Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Ipswich Civic Hall, and Logan Entertainment Centre.

provide PAC staff and volunteers with the capacity to successfully undertake research of this nature in the future as part of an ongoing commitment to audience development and relationship building.

## **b) Methodology**

In order to assist Theatre to expand its audiences, the *Talking Theatre* project instigated direct interaction between significant stakeholders and representatives of the non-theatregoing community. Fourteen publicly-owned PACs who were members of NARPACA<sup>2</sup> opened their doors to welcome those who had volunteered to participate in the study. The *Talking Theatre* project was applied to PACs in northern Australia and to a selection of non-theatregoers residing in the regions because it was argued, “The future of the arts depends on finding new supporters/markets outside of current traditional support eg. non-theatregoers and regional populations” (Australia Council, 2000: 19). The ‘top end’ of Australia remains the nation’s most regional in demography, with half its population outside the metropolitan area. The northern Australian regional arts sector has limited financial and human resources to regularly undertake audience development research to stop the decline of audiences to live performance.

Non-theatregoers from each of the fourteen regions were recruited for the research via media coverage for the need for suitable participants. Men and women, aged over eighteen years, living in the local area, who identified themselves as non-theatregoers and did not attend the local PAC, were asked to contact the PAC in their region to register their interest in participating in the research. 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 (51%), and earning \$20,000-\$50,000 (AUS) per annum (45%). 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 (61%), and exploring arts and crafts markets (57%).

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<sup>2</sup> The Northern Australian Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA) is a large regional theatre network presiding over a touring circuit of immense value.

Twenty-four participants in each region were sought to attend three live performances (free of charge) at their PAC. Each performance would be significantly different in genre (for example, a play, a ballet, and an opera). Immediately following each of the three performances, they were asked to complete a post-performance questionnaire to generate quantitative data concerning: their expectations and levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the performance; the elements of performance that ensured their enjoyment and understanding; the underlying messages in the performance; and anything or anyone in the performance they could relate to. The participants answered the questions without consultation and completed the task in five minutes. The data was later collated and analysed using SPSS software. The statistics drawn from this data could then be compared with and placed alongside the findings of the focus group discussions.

After the participants completed the post-performance questionnaire they talked together in groups of twelve about their reactions to the performance. The one-hour post-performance group discussions were audio-recorded and facilitated. The facilitator began the discussion by establishing the purpose of the focus groups, which was to share with each other any particular aspects of the performance or theatre outing that the participants enjoyed, disliked, could not understand, found significant or surprising. Essentially the discussion was framed as a dedicated occasion for participants to reflect on their time at the theatre and to discuss any aspects of interest with their peers. The facilitator then played a passive role to encourage the participants to direct the topics of conversation and to interact with each other rather than answer a series of facilitator-posed questions. The unstructured, free-flowing discussions generated substantial qualitative data that provided insight into the elements of performance and of theatregoing that were important to new audiences. The data was later transcribed and interpreted using content analysis and thematic analysis.

Participants were also asked to complete, prior to their attendance at the first performance, a questionnaire designed to develop a demographic and psychographic profile of non-theatregoers. Participants were also asked to complete, a few weeks after attending the third performance, another questionnaire to generate feedback about the research, the PAC, and the likelihood of their future attendance. Content



analysis enabled this data to be interpreted and then combined with the findings of post-performance questionnaires and discussions to provide the PACs (and the other stakeholders in the research) with an understanding of a regional non-theatre-goer profile and of non-theatre-goers' reception of live performance and of the venues presenting them.

## **Findings**

### a) Profile of a non-theatre-goer living in regional Queensland or in the Northern Territory

As indicated earlier, the *Talking Theatre* sample included a diverse collection of people. Overall, the study primarily attracted women, 30-49 year olds (of either sex), white collar professionals and stay-at-home mothers, annual average income earners (\$20 000-\$50 000), active leisure seekers; social beings (regularly spending time with family and friends), and people who enjoyed engaging with fiction (regularly reading and watching television/film).

Interestingly, a significant number of those involved in the research were middle-aged (40% of total sample), tertiary educated (46% of the total sample), medium (38% of the total sample) to high-income earners (14.5% of total sample). This finding supported but also refuted the common perception that theatre-going is for elites in society. On the one hand, half the total sample consisted of 'the elites' (well educated people earning substantial incomes) and they were clearly attracted to the idea of becoming theatre-goers. This could suggest that they had an aptitude for engaging with the arts because of their education and financial position. However, the fact that so many well-educated, financially secure citizens were eligible to participate in the study because they were not theatre-goers highlighted that education and income did not automatically ensure appreciation and participation in the arts, nor elitism.

The non-theatre-goers (regardless of education and wealth) in the project had one key factor in common; they did not socialise with peers or family who attended Theatre and they were not encouraged by them to do so. Even the well-educated, financially

secure participants in the *Talking Theatre* project were not introduced by their parents (or other family members) to Theatre when they were children. They did not have family or respected peers encouraging them to become theatregoers, or talking to them about their theatregoing experiences. Thus, it appeared that this lack of familial initiation to Theatre and absence of peer recommendation or introduction stifled their attendance as adults.

#### b) Primary reasons for non-attendance

Ticket price was cited in the responses to the pre-performance questionnaire as the most popular reason for non-attendance (50% of the entire sample). Sixty percent of those who stated the ticket prices were prohibitive were earning annual incomes of below \$10 000 to \$35 000. Parenting responsibilities, the perceived low quality of the performances, and work commitments were the other popular reasons for non-attendance. Those earning higher incomes (over \$60 000 per year) tended to state work commitments and parenting responsibilities as deterrents to attendance. Yet, the participants in the study (regardless of income) were active leisure seekers and did spend time and money on other activities such as dining out, going to the cinema, engaging in family gatherings, and visiting arts and crafts markets.

Conversation at the first post-performance group discussions typically included participants' reasons for non-attendance. Here it was found that a larger barrier prevented their engagement with Theatre. This barrier was the fear of the unknown and the subsequent concern was that the experience may be a waste of time and money. Thus the above deterrents for attendance were listed by the participants in the questionnaire. The non-theatregoers mentioned that their lack of awareness of what would be involved in theatregoing, their limited understanding of what the performances would entail, as well as the absence of friends or family interested in coming with them, made the notion of theatre attendance too daunting. Therefore, the risks associated with attendance ensured that the experience seemed either too expensive or too time-consuming.

Results of the pre-performance questionnaire also indicated that almost three quarters of the entire sample (72%) were attracted to the *Talking Theatre* project because it

provided opportunity to attend performances that they would not normally see. Sixty-seven percent of the sample saw the study as a chance to obtain free tickets and to take part in an interesting project. The questionnaire results also showed that the most common anticipated gains for the participants in the study were: enjoyment; a better appreciation and understanding of live performance and of the PAC; and exposure to performances they would not normally attend. The most popular expectation of the non-theatre-goers' role in the study was to provide feedback about the performances and the PACs.

### c) Primary reactions to live performance

The participants experienced three performances of different type to enable the PACs to demonstrate on a small scale the scope of their annual seasons. The diversity and the repetition of attendance also allowed the non-theatre-goers to assess the kinds of performance that appealed to them. The performance genres across the fourteen PACs consisted of plays, ballet, opera, stand-up comedy, contemporary dance, musicals, classical music, and other instrumental music concerts. Previous to attendance the pre-performance questionnaire findings illustrated that the majority of the entire sample believed they had a preference for comedy (85%) and for popular/rock concerts (72%). Over 60% of the sample thought they would prefer drama (62%), while 58% stated stand-up comedy, and 51% indicated musicals (please note that participants could indicate more than one style of performance when answering this question).

Prior to the *Talking Theatre* project the non-theatre-goers had been wary about whether they would enjoy or understand theatrical performances.

Before the *Talking Theatre* program I thought that theatre was boring, even though I had never been before.

(*Talking Theatre* participant)

Yet the research found that all three performances in each of the PACs were enjoyed and understood by the majority of the participants. The average rating of enjoyment across the entire sample and across all performances was 7 out of 10. The average

rating of understanding across the entire sample and across all performances was 7.5 out of 10. The performers best assisted most participants to enjoy and comprehend the performances. The non-theatre-goers in the study were particularly impressed by the performers' skill and found them engaging because they were performing in real time, in real life, and in close proximity to the audience.

I really admire the performers. They are very clever, especially by the way they keep an audience enthralled. Live performances have atmosphere and are magical.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

The humour and the sound/music were also key elements in producing enjoyment and comprehension for many of the participants. These factors were in keeping with their preferences for comedies, pop/rock concerts and musicals.

d) Recognition of cultures and ability to relate to performance and those in attendance

In the post-performance group discussions, the non-theatre-goers raised a variety of topics which could loosely be identified as either positive or negative comments about the performances, other key aspects discussed in relation to the performances (for example, themes, specific moments not understood, expectations), or attitude/behaviour/knowledge development of participants. Of interest to this paper was the finding that many participants could personally relate to, and recognise from life, situations and characters in the performances. Discussion concerning this topic was a regular feature in the focus groups and the ability to relate to aspects in the performances increased participant enjoyment.

I found myself 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...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.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

Another result derived from responses to the post-performance questionnaires demonstrated that 56% of the entire sample could relate to someone or something in

the performances. In most cases it was the characters and the relationships between the characters that they could relate to. These findings indicated that the cultures represented on stage were not that different to the cultures of a significant number of the non-theatre-goers. Of note, 35% of the sample who enjoyed and understood the performances could not relate to them. In these cases it seemed that Theatre did not represent their cultures but still delivered an entertaining outcome.

Many of the non-theatre-goers had expressed concern that they would not enjoy or understand the performances because they would not be able to relate to anything in the performances nor be able to relate to the other theatre patrons. This concern stemmed from their belief that Theatre was elitist and catered for a certain type of person whose interests were different to theirs. For instance, “I always thought (Theatre) was for cigar smoking old people” (*Talking Theatre* participant comment). However, comments about the similarity of the paying audience members to themselves were consistently made in the post-performance group discussions. Participants noted the ‘smart-casual’ attire of the theatre patrons as opposed to the formality that they had expected. They noted the variety of age ranges present and saw many audience members who appeared to be a similar age to them. The participants were also pleasantly surprised to see children and families at the theatre because many had assumed that children would not be welcome in this perceived formal adult leisure environment (as they had not attended as children). The discovery that many of the participants could relate to aspects in the performances and to the theatre patrons further assisted them to enjoy the experience. It showed that the content or concepts in the performances could be relevant to their lives and that they could fit in with the theatre-going crowd.

#### e) Impact of social interaction and peers

The pleasure of discovering that audience members were similar to themselves was further enhanced by the non-theatre-goers’ enjoyment of spending time with each other during the project. Apart from the observation that the participants were comfortable and relaxed with each other over the duration of three theatre visits, the results of the final questionnaire, completed at home a few weeks after the last arranged theatre visit, illustrated the importance of peer interaction.

The following statistics were derived from 57% of the entire sample that elected to complete and return by mail the final feedback questionnaire. These findings showed how important interaction with others was for informing individuals' perceptions about theatregoing and about specific performances. The findings also pointed to the dual purpose of human interaction as educative and entertaining. The results demonstrated the pleasure we as humans take in communicating with other humans. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents stated they had a greater understanding of the performances after taking part in the post-performance group discussions. Sixty-six percent of the respondents also stated that they would be more likely to attend live performances in the future if they knew they could meet other people afterwards to discuss them.

The post-performance group discussions were popular because they provided the opportunity for the participants to listen to others' ideas (78.5%); to have their own thoughts and feelings valued (62.5%); to have the space and time to think more about the performances (60.5%); and to get to know other people (60%). In fact, many of the participants stated they enjoyed the post-performance discussions as much, if not more, than the performances they were to talk about. Three quotes now follow as examples of the comments made by participants in the study.

I totally enjoyed the project. The performances, social interaction and the hospitality of the Centre added up to a lovely experience...Everyone was able to speak freely and have their two cents worth.

I really enjoyed the group's feedback, it gave more insight into the whole thing.

I LOVED attending these shows and especially enjoyed the focus groups - people made certain comments that I hadn't picked up on myself.

Further to this peer influence and interaction, came the finding that 29% of all participants returned on average more than once to their PAC after completing the study. Factoring in the paying guests that they brought with them (other non-theatregoers who were not in the study), resulted in a ticket multiplier of 397% (or a ratio of 3.97 to 1). The non-theatregoers had not only become new paying audiences

but were actively recommending theatre attendance to their family and friends and seeking their company at live performances. It appeared that many in their social networks were encouraged by the peer recommendation and the personal invitation to engage in the act of theatregoing.

I bought a ticket ...I took a friend who had never been to the Ipswich Civic Hall before and now she is going to other performances.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

Thank you for involving us. I finally want to say that I hope they start bringing family tickets in as I am keen to bring my older kids and show them how good live shows are.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

#### f) Communication breakdown between Theatre and the non-theatregoing community

The results of the *Talking Theatre* project indicated that once non-theatregoers had directly experienced Theatre for themselves and shared their reception of the event with peers, the majority of them could confidently express their enjoyment and comprehension of live performance and the act of theatregoing. It was found that most of the non-theatregoers participating in the research could relate to at least one of the performances and could personally identify with something or someone in them. The participants also felt comfortable at the PACs because they were casual and social environments filled with audience members who seemed similar in age and dress to the non-theatregoers.

These findings amongst others appear to indicate that for many the decision to not attend live performance is due to a lack of awareness stemmed by a communication breakdown between the non-engaged and the Theatre industry. In turn, this lack of awareness combined with a lack of peer recommendation leads to a variety of perceived risks deterring attendance. The results of the *Talking Theatre* project do not suggest that Theatre simply resonates with particular cultures or groups of people by only expressing a narrow worldview. Instead the results demonstrated that non-theatregoers (of various income and education levels) were more than capable of enjoying and understanding live performances, and engaging with the content and concepts portrayed.

These results indicated to non-theatre-goers that it was likely that they would enjoy and understand performances if they elected to purchase tickets in the future. It was very possible that they would see their cultures represented on stage and surrounding them in the auditorium. The findings of the final feedback questionnaire supported this assertion as 86.5% of the respondents believed that their local PAC provided the kinds of performances they would like to attend. The findings also highlighted that 73.5% of the respondents had encouraged others in their community to attend the local PAC since taking part in the *Talking Theatre* project. Not only were 93% of the respondents more interested in live performances since taking part in *Talking Theatre*, but 31.5% paid to attend a performance at their local PAC *during* their involvement in the project.

For the PACs, the results indicated that their current theatre programming was satisfactory because the performances were enjoyed and understood by the non-theatre-goers. This suggested that their programming decisions were appropriate and that their programming practices needed not to be significantly altered when designing a theatre season with the new market of non-theatre-goers in mind. However, the way in which they communicated their season and their PAC required review and alteration.

Regular discussion by the participants in the focus groups provided a wealth of suggestions to the PACs to assist in bridging the divide between non-theatre-goers and the Theatre industry. The participants explained that non-theatre-goers require more information and insight into what upcoming performances are about and how they might be able to relate to them. In particular, they wish to know: the storyline, the central issues, the aspects they may be able to relate to, the details about the genre, the performances' similarity to other popular art forms, how the performances might make them feel, any performers they may recognise, and the ticket prices. Each point builds expectation and understanding of the performance to assist them in their decision-making. As two participants in *Talking Theatre* explained,

I see the shows advertised in the newspaper but because I don't know anything about them (and little detail is provided), I have no idea which one to go to (so don't go to any).



Basically I had no idea what to expect. You can tell how oblivious I am to ballet, I actually thought it was like a musical where they come out and they kind of perform a bit of storyline and then break off into some dance and then come back into the storyline. So the whole vocabulary was a big shock for me, especially going from our last performance where it was all based on words to absolutely nothing.

The non-theatre-goers were also pleasantly surprised with what the PACs had on offer apart from the performances themselves (for example, bars, cafes and dining, outdoor areas, wide range of patrons, friendly staff and social atmosphere). They stated that these aspects needed to be actively promoted to inform the community of their existence because they were an important part of the outing and integral to social interaction with family and friends.

### **Conclusion**

Quality feedback from interested non-theatre-goers to the PACs, combined with participants' direct engagement with a range of performances, the PACs, and the perspectives of other non-theatre-goers, created a meaningful two-way dialogue that helped each party to learn from the other and to feel valued by the other. This sharing of information led to increased understanding of non-theatre-goers and their needs by the PACs, as well as an increased interest by the participants in live performances and a greater confidence to attend outside of research conditions.

The study also showed the power of social interaction and of personal recommendation upon theatre attendance. The post-performance discussion groups played an integral role in building participants' knowledge of, and confidence in, theatre-going. They also provided a fun, relaxed social atmosphere sought by the non-theatre-goers in their usual leisure time. Beyond the discussion groups, the participants were talking with their peers about the performances they were attending in the *Talking Theatre* project. They also began recommending performances and encouraging family and friends to attend. Thus the barriers to attendance were lessened during the project and the potential for their future theatre-going greatly increased.

Taking part in this study has given me a better understanding of the types of theatre I truly enjoy. I had fun and appreciated the opportunity to be involved.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

Thank-you for giving me the opportunity to appreciate live theatre. It will now play an important choice in my entertainment spending.

*(Talking Theatre participant)*

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