

Title

Talking Theatre: developing audiences for regional Australia

Key words

Culture, interface, non-theatre-goers, theatre, symbolic interactionism, audience development, regional Australia, community.

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Talking Theatre: Interfacing with new audiences

Abstract

Theatre is commonly understood to be a reflection of, or comment on, or alternative to, the collective culture it is presented in. It is argued to be a place for examining the concepts of culture and to play a significant role in the presentation and development of cultures. Yet there are many people in Australia who do not recognise Theatre as an interface to their cultures.

The *Talking Theatre* research 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. In particular, 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.

The *Talking Theatre* project found that the cultures re-presented on stage were not that different to the cultures of the non-theatre-goers. The participants in the research made clear that the theatrical performances and the social aspect of theatre attendance did reflect their cultures. Limited awareness of Theatre's relevance to their lives combined with a lack of positive peer influence to attend, were the chief deterrents to theatre attendance for the non-theatre-goers in the study.

Article

Theatre¹ is a very special kind of interface² where the actions of humans are re-presented through the actions of performers, which are presented to audiences, who in turn themselves act in relation to the re-presented/presented actions of those on stage. Yet, Theatre as an interface reaches further than this one simple example of theatrical communication. This paper contends that Theatre interfaces on five distinct levels of social interaction to create meanings that further form and inform cultures.

- 1) The institution of Theatre (or the theatre world/industry) that interacts with other institutions or industries (eg. media, advertising, retail, education), which delineates the unique functions of each while also pointing to the things they have in common.
- 2) The many people or groups/organizations working within the institution of Theatre who interact with each other (eg. theatre company to theatre company, or within theatre companies), which impacts on the practices, policies, and partnerships within the institution.
- 3) The actors who interact with each other on stage during theatrical performances, which enables them to clearly communicate with each other to effectively re-present the actions associated with human experience.
- 4) The theatrical performance (as a whole) and the audience (as individuals and as a group) interact, which makes possible the stories of humanity to be presented and responded to.
- 5) The audience members who interact with each other, which informs them of how to act as social beings at the Theatre, how to act toward the theatrical performance and its cultural commentary, and how to act as human beings who operate as part of a collective.

Social interaction generates meaning which when compiled creates culture (see footnote 2). Each individual has his/her own culture that is a formation of themselves in relation to others. A group of individuals can constitute a culture when they share the same meanings. Each social act has the potential to expand culture as new or revised meanings are adopted through interaction with others. Theatre

operates as an interface to these cultures by providing the space for multiple meanings derived from human experiences to be considered and judged against the understandings of all the individuals present. Therefore, Theatre plays 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 interfacing?

Cultural choice positions us: it tells us and others who we are, and it defines for us and for others who we are not. It sorts us into 'kinds' of people. Although these kinds come to seem 'natural', they have everything to do with the organization of the social. (Bennett, 1999: 8)

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 (Baumol and Bowen, 1973; Throsby and Withers, 1979; Gourdon, 1982; Bennett, Frow and Emmison, 1999; Australia Council, 2000) 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’³. Or in other words, those who have the “...interpretative, intellectual and aesthetic skills...” (Bennett *etal.* 1999: 230) available to a selected minority via the education system and the family. International research has shown that the greater one’s education the more likely one is to attend the arts (McCarthy *etal.* 2004; Australia Council, 2000; Kotler & Scheff, 1997). In Australia it is also estimated that tertiary educated citizens are 194% more likely to participate in the arts than those with primary schooling (Bennett, 1999: 232). Webb, Shirato and Danaher (2002: 148) agree stating,

Those who possess knowledge at least of ‘high art’ codes do in fact tend to be better educated, and often ‘upper class’, as he (Bourdieu) showed so convincingly in *Distinction*.

It makes sense that those with a high level of education and a disposable income would be better placed to attend Theatre because they have the financial ability to purchase tickets and the intellectual/aesthetic knowledge to engage. However, their high incomes and high education levels only reinforce the perception (of those who do not attend) that theatregoing is an elitist activity that is suitable for certain groups of people to attend. As Sayre and King (2003: 246) assert, “Appearance at these events reinforces social status and proclaims identity as a member of the elite group.” Bourdieu (in Swartz, 1997: 146) also confirmed a class or group is understood by others ‘...as much by its *being-perceived as* by its *being* – by its consumption...” For those who do not believe they have the social status to be a part of this group (or culture) there is a sense that they will not be welcome to attend and that the Theatre experience will not be relevant or satisfying to them. Webb, Shirato, and Danaher,

(2002: 153-154) confirm these concerns by making reference to Bourdieu who suggested that,

...the design and structure of cultural institutions tend to exclude people who do not have the appropriate background or capital, and that they perform this exclusion while giving the appearance of being available to everyone. Working-class people tend not to go to such places because they are not sure how to behave, and the institutions do not make themselves 'user-friendly'...What counts as 'good taste' is still largely decided (today) by institutions and individuals who are not necessarily inclined to be user-friendly, because taste depends on what Bourdieu calls the 'cultural arbitrary'. This is his way of describing the effect whereby things (whether practices, products or values) are made to seem universally significant because they are important to dominant people and institutions...

Yet during the recruitment of non-theatre-goers as participants for the *Talking Theatre* project⁴ it was found that a significant number of those interested in being involved in the research were middle-aged⁵ (40% of total sample), tertiary educated⁶ (46% of the total sample), medium (38% of the total sample) to high-income earners⁷ (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.

It seemed that high education and income were not solely responsible for determining theatre attendance. 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.⁸ For example, 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 stifled their attendance as adults. Kotler and Scheff (1997: 73) cite another clear example of the significance of peers on theatregoing. A study (1985) 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 knew about 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. The non-theatregoers (regardless of education and wealth) in the *Talking Theatre* project did not socialise with peers who attended Theatre and were not encouraged by them to do so.

As family and peers are closest to us they are likely to have the most impact on our culture (or the formation of ourselves in relation to others). Roberts argues (1972 in Bennett, *etal.*, 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 (or do not act in terms of theatregoing) 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, social interaction is integral to theatre attendance.

Yet, it is common for Theatre as an institution to refer to those who do not attend the theatre as ‘the masses’, ‘the great unwashed’, ‘the general public’, and potential ‘bums on seats’. This indicates disrespect for non-theatre-goers and an ‘us and them’ mentality which instantly places them on a lower social scale because they are not ‘one of us’. It comes as no surprise then, that many citizens believe that theatre-going is an elitist activity that presents cultures that are not their own. As Trenaman (in Williams, 1966: 92) states “...what we loosely call culture (in this instance Theatre) is identified in their minds with status, with rewards and with power in our society.” Theatre also presumes that all non-theatre-goers are part of the same social group. The finding that half the sample in the *Talking Theatre* project was tertiary educated and earning medium to high-incomes already demonstrated that this is not the case. Roberts (in Bennett, 1981: 269) agrees that “...other interests, such as the traditional arts, attract small taste publics rather than entire social classes.” However, it seems to be simpler to lump non-theatre-goers together as one group and to assume their demographic and psychographic profiles are equitable, yet quite separate to one’s own.

It is very easy to think of the cultural level of a people as something single and something fixed. This is the trouble with phrases like ‘the masses’, which lead us to think not of actual people, living and growing in different ways, but of some large many-headed thing with fixed habits...While we go on talking about ‘the masses’ we can have neither the respect for people nor the sense of growth that underlie responsibility...and will be constantly tempted to divide our culture into separate areas with no bridges between them. (Williams, 1966: 93-95)

It is valid to understand non-theatre-goers as a culture, and they do recognise themselves as members of that culture, but not because they all represent the same demographic and psychographic profiles. They belong to the culture of non-theatre-going and are united in their understanding that each does not attend, and that their reasons for non-attendance are quite similar. However, if Theatre does not attempt to interact with non-theatre-goers to gain insight into this culture, it will undermine opportunities to build bridges. These same bridges could one day enable non-theatre-goers to cross over and become theatre-goers, and as such it is imperative that they be built. This was the central purpose of the *Talking Theatre* project. Its strength lies in building bridges or creating an interface where non-theatre-goers and Theatre can meet.

In order to assist Theatre to expand its audiences, the *Talking Theatre* project instigated direct interaction between significant stakeholders and representatives of the non-theatre-going community. Fourteen publicly-owned performing arts centres (PACs) as members of the Northern Australian Regional Performing Arts Centres Association⁹, two State Government arts funding agencies (Arts Queensland and Arts Northern Territory), the Australian Research Council (Federal Government research funding body), and the Queensland University of Technology invested in the three-year (2004-2006) audience research and development project. *Talking*

Theatre sought to build new audiences for the participating PACs by performing as an interface where the non-theatre-goers would directly experience the PACs and a selection of their performances, and the PACs would listen and learn from the non-theatre-goers' attitudes, reactions and suggestions about what they have on offer. This interconnection and communication between the parties would lead to a greater understanding of each other and thus, lead to change in behaviour and outlook. Furthermore, the research findings and recommendations would assist the State and Federal Government funding agencies in their future interaction with the PACs and the Australian community to continue to improve participation levels of Australians in the arts.

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 eg. non-theatre-goers 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.

The *Talking Theatre* project provided the interface between those who did not attend the theatre and those who presented theatrical performances to their local communities. Non-theatre-goers from each of the fourteen regions were recruited for the research via the media's coverage for the need for suitable participants. Men and

women, aged over eighteen years, living in the local area, who identified themselves as non-theatre-goers 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%).

Twenty-four participants in each region were sought to attend three live performances (free of charge) at their PAC. They were asked to take part in post-performance questionnaires and focus group discussions following each performance to share their reception of the experiences with each other. After the participants completed the questionnaires 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. After establishing the purpose of the group discussions, the facilitator 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 theatre-going that were important to new audiences. Full transcripts of the discussions were included in the reports provided to the PACs.

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-theatre-goers. 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. This combination of quantitative and qualitative data was analysed and the findings reported to the PACs and the other stakeholders in the research.

The design and application of the *Talking Theatre* project meant that it acted as an interface between multiple parties. Clearly, it bridged the gap between a sample of non-theatre-goers and PACs: the non-engaged and the theatres. However, it also enabled interaction between a sample of non-theatre-goers as audience members and a selection of theatrical performances.

One way of influencing people's actions is to cast them into a role that we want so that they think of themselves in that manner...

(Charon, 1992: 151)

The non-theatre-goers in the *Talking Theatre* project had the potential to become theatre-goers because most had contemplated attendance in the past and were evidently interested in experiencing live theatrical performances due to their participation in the research. They understood that their participation in the project would enable them to attend three performances at no financial cost and to take part in post-performance discussions with other non-theatre-goers. This proposition provided the impetus for them to finally interface with theatrical performances. The opportunity to attend the performances and to play the role of audience members, as provided by the *Talking Theatre* project and its variety of stakeholders, allowed the participants to directly experience what it was like to be a theatre-goer.

The research design also enabled the non-theatre-goers to interact with other non-theatre-goers when they attended the theatres together and discussed their reception after each performance. Although the participants came from all walks of life, and may not have met under any other circumstances, they successfully bonded together because they recognised themselves as members of a particular culture – non-theatre-goers. One of the central beliefs of the research design was that the combination of direct interface with theatrical performances, and participation in post-performance discussions with peers would best assist the non-theatre-goers to develop a greater understanding of Theatre and to become more interested in attendance.

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

(Talking Theatre participant)

The opportunity to personally interface with theatrical performances created meanings for each individual. To immediately share their perspectives of the interface with others helped to confirm or to add to these meanings to further expand culture and ultimately define self. Charon (1992: 167) explains,

Interaction creates perspectives – our approach to reality, our angle of vision...arise through interaction with others....Interaction defines social objects and symbols – people talk to one another and point things out in their environment. Things take on meaning...as a result of this interaction process...Interaction creates and defines self – we come to see ourselves as objects, owing to our interaction with others. We interact with significant others and reference groups, develop selfhood, and with selfhood we are able to do a number of things in relation to our self...

The research provided the opportunity for the non-theatre-goers to also interact with the culture of Theatre, to meet ‘head-on’ the ‘world of theatre’ as embodied in the actions and values of this culture as portrayed at the local PACs. For instance, the participants engaged with the protocols and etiquette of theatre attendance, and they

interacted with PAC staff and paying theatre patrons. Likewise, those who contributed to the culture of Theatre were placed in a position where they had to interface with non-theatre-goers as audiences and subsequently derive meaning from these encounters.

I think the project is producing very useful information - even if some of the information from the study group is only reinforcing things that we have assumed or perceived to be. It's helpful for us in our negotiations up the line.

(A PAC staff member)

It was amazing running the focus group after the show. They (participants) reacted in a completely different way to how we expected... It's making me re-think our next marketing campaign.

(Another PAC staff member)

Finally, *Talking Theatre* also acted as interface between the PACs and the participating State and Federal government funding agencies. The perspectives of the participants were communicated to the PACs and to the government agencies, which could then evaluate the non-theatre-goers' experiences in light of their practices and policies. The research assisted further interaction between the two parties, which was necessary because they relied on each other to ensure all residents of northern Australia had access to quality arts experiences. The PACs were reliant on government funding to operate, and to subsidise the costs of touring performing arts companies to the regions. The government agencies were reliant on the PACs to deliver relevant and satisfying performances to their local communities.

Talking Theatre went even further to actively contribute to the interfaces it established by recording, evaluating and reporting on the ideas that emerged. This meant that the new ideas derived from the interfacing of multiple parties could interact with past ideas (or meanings) held by each. This interface of past and newly

identified meanings created a space for comparison and reflection leading to an extension of meaning in each party's culture. For example, it was discovered that one of the central concerns for the non-theatre-goers about attendance was that they would have difficulty enjoying or understanding the performances. This difficulty would likely mean that they would not be able to relax and engage in a satisfying leisure pursuit, which would deem the time and money spent on the activity wasted. However, one of the results of the *Talking Theatre* project, as derived from responses to the post-performance questionnaires completed after each of the three performances at each of the PACs, demonstrated that the participants did not find it difficult to enjoy or understand the performances. Instead, the average rating of enjoyment across the entire sample of participants and across all performances was 7 out of 10. (The most commonly referred to elements in performance that created enjoyment were: the performers, the sound/music, the humour, and then the acting.) The average rating of understanding across the entire sample of participants and across all performances was 7.5 out of 10. (The most commonly referred to elements in performance that generated understanding were: the performers, the sound/music, the acting, and then the dialogue.)

This finding illustrated to all parties, including the participants, that non-theatre-goers were more than capable of enjoying and understanding live performances. This result 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 also made clear that they were capable of engaging with performance and that the performances were satisfying to them. There was no need to consider themselves inadequate or unsuitable candidates for theatre attendees. For the PACs, the result

showed 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 communicate their season requires review and alteration. As one participant 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.

For the culture of Theatre, this finding made clear 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 and to sanitise performances to ensure that they be pleasurable and comprehensible to non-theatre-goers. Instead, it suggested that the ways in which Theatre presents itself, and the experiences it offers to the public, should be changed to prevent Australian citizens from becoming non-theatre-goers. As Miller (1976: 55) confirms,

We are constantly taking information given in one form and translating it into alternative forms, searching for ways to map a strange, new phenomenon into simpler and more familiar ones. The search is something we call 'thinking'; if we are successful, we call it 'understanding'.

Clearly, Theatre could take greater responsibility for educating non-theatre-goers about what they have to offer to enhance their understanding about theatre (Kotler & Scheff, 1997: 518).

One of the reasons the non-theatre-goers thought they would not enjoy or understand theatrical performances was 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, another result derived from participant responses to the post-performance questionnaires demonstrated that 56% of the entire sample¹⁰ 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. This indicated that the cultures re-presented on stage were not that different to the cultures of the non-theatre-goers.

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)

Comments about the similarity of the paying audience members to themselves were also 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 themselves. 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 theatrical performances could be relevant to their lives and that they could fit in with the theatregoing crowd.

For the PACs this result again confirmed that their theatre programming was appropriate to the collective experiences of the local community. It also highlighted that the family-friendly, casual environment of their theatres was important to the success of attracting non-theatregoers to their performances. This finding suggested that the PACs must attempt to make clear in their publicity the aspects of upcoming performances that community members might be likely to relate to or identify with. It also pointed out the need for ongoing promotion of the PACs' friendly and all-inclusive environments. For the culture of Theatre, the result showed that its product (performances) did not need to alter but the ways in which it presented itself, and the experiences it offered to the public, should be changed to openly welcome a broader range of people to become theatregoers.

The positive impact of the *Talking Theatre* interface upon the participants was further illustrated by the results of the final questionnaire they completed at home a few weeks after their last arranged theatre visit. 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' culture about theatregoing and about specific theatrical performances. As Charon (1992: 177) states, "Culture arises in and is changed in interaction as people put forth the particular meanings and ideas

that they believe in.” 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%).

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.

(Talking Theatre participant)

In fact, many of the participants stated they enjoyed the post-performance discussions as much, if not more, than the theatrical performances they were to talk about.

The participants’ direct experiences of interfacing with the theatrical performances, Theatre, as well as the other non-theatre-goers participating in the research, helped to change their attitudes about theatre attendance and began to affect their behaviour. The results of the final feedback questionnaire showed that 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 *Talking Theatre*. Not only was 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. These participants brought with them to the performance family and peers who were not associated with the *Talking Theatre* project. Thus, the reach of *Talking Theatre* as an interface spread beyond the confines of the research and into that highly significant and influential arena; family. The evident willingness of the families or friends to attend with the new theatregoers (or past participants) demonstrated the power of social interaction and personal recommendation. Blumer (1953 in Charon, 1992: 145) claims,

...the most important feature of human association is that (people) *take each other into account*... Such awareness of another person in this sense taking him (*sic*) and his (*sic*) acts into consideration becomes the occasion for orienting oneself and for the direction of one's own conduct.

As an interface, the *Talking Theatre* project helped multiple cultures (non-theatregoers, PACs, Theatre, and Government) to better understand each other. In so doing, each culture came to better understand itself. By providing an environment that welcomed interaction and valued relationships, all parties were placed in a situation that allowed them to contemplate new ideas that would impact on their future actions. The *Talking Theatre* project illustrated the importance of consultation and the merit in valuing others' cultures. To ensure future audience development and increased participation in the arts, this interaction is required on an ongoing basis. As each party continues to interact, it will become better informed and better placed to take positive steps for change.

Over time interaction creates culture...culture helps create continuity over time and is taken on by the actors as guides to action. Individuals enter situations with all kinds of tools to guide them as they interact with others, but the longer they interact with those others, the more likely something new will enter into their guides for action... (Charon, 1992: 172)

The following quotes from *Talking Theatre* participants demonstrate that these non-theatregoers will likely soon understand themselves to be a part of the theatregoing culture.

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.

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

I now know better what to expect and I am more comfortable.

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.

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¹ Theatre in this context refers to the Theatre industry or to Theatre as an institution. In the *Talking Theatre* project, the participating regional performing arts centres and all they encompass represent Theatre.

² The tenets of Symbolic Interactionism frame this telling of a regional Australian audience reception study that operated as an interface to assist the development of new theatre audiences. Social interaction (or interfacing) is the key to determining and expanding culture. Culture in this context is defined as the compilation of meanings that we have formed through our interaction with others (Littlejohn, 1992). Therefore, the research design of the *Talking Theatre* project insisted that conversations between non-theatre-goers and theatres took place to build new audiences for the future. Such communication would inform and reform the participating stakeholders in the research to change the outlooks and behaviours of all involved. This paper examines the *Talking Theatre* project as the interface of culture, Theatre, government, and non-theatre-goers.

A culture's reality is defined in terms of its meanings, which arise from interaction within social groups...These communication activities create, sustain, and change the very nature of reality in a group or culture.

(Littlejohn, 1992: 187).

Williams (in Bennett *et al*, 1981) argues that it is almost pointless attempting to define *culture*, as there appear to be endless meanings for the term. Even Littlejohn's explanation of an aspect of symbolic interactionism (above) presents two meanings for culture within the space of a few lines. For the purposes of clarity, *culture* in this paper refers to the compilation of meanings that humans form through their interaction with others (Littlejohn, 1992). Each person's compilation of meanings (or culture) differs due to his/her unique series of interactions experienced throughout life. Therefore, culture is to be understood as "...our formation of ourselves..." (Bennett, 1999: 9) in relation to others. Although each person has their own unique culture, groups of individuals can hold similar meanings about particular things, and thus as a collective be also commonly referred to as a culture (the above quote is an example of this). In other circumstances, this same group of individuals may not possess analogous meanings and thus not constitute a culture at that time. Yet, some of these individuals may be aligned with other individuals beyond the current group, and so become a part of another culture. In this way, individuals and society are inseparable and interdependent entities (Littlejohn, 1992: 170) as it is interaction between individuals and groups that creates meaning which when compiled becomes culture. Following the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), as interaction with others occurs throughout life the meanings that we hold (or our cultures) are in a constant state of flux. Each new interaction has the potential to change or at least to inform our understandings of the world, and so provide opportunity for our cultures (individual and/or collective) to expand.

Symbolic interaction involves...ascertaining the meaning of the actions or remarks of the other person, and...conveying indications to another person as to how he (*sic*) is to act...Through this process the (individuals or group of individuals) fit their own acts to the ongoing acts of one another and guide others in doing so.

(Blumer 1966, in Charon, 1992: 147-148)

In other words, by taking other people *into account* (Blumer 1953, in Charon 1992) by observing and assessing their actions, we can then better understand and assess our actions in relation to theirs. In turn, our actions or social acts (Mead, 1934 and Kuhn, 1956 in Littlejohn, 1992) are perceived by others who then perform their social acts in relation to ours. Meaning is derived as a result of this social exchange. The meanings that we draw from interfacing with others affect the ways we understand the people and objects that we encounter. Following this, our interpretation of the meanings of the things that we encounter is determined by our interaction with them and further developed upon interaction with others (Blumer, 1969). Thus, meaning constantly evolves and changes with each interaction. "Meaning, which is the heart of experience, is a product of interaction, making communication the core of human experience" (Littlejohn, 1992: 170).

Thus, to interact, or to interface, is to communicate in order to bring about meaning, which when compiled creates culture. It is necessary at this point to define an *interface* (n.) as the point of contact or communication between two or more individuals, groups, organizations, or areas of study (Delbridge *et al.*, 1991). Furthermore, to *interface* (vb.) is to interact (Delbridge *et al.*, 1991), which

ultimately means that multiple parties can interface (interact) at the interface (point of contact). The *Talking Theatre* project operated as an interface (or point of contact) for a number of stakeholders in the research to interface (interact) in order for meanings to be generated to affect the cultures of all those involved in the project. The *Talking Theatre* project will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.

Theatre then (alongside other cultural events) is to be viewed as a reflection of, or comment on, or alternative to, the collective culture it is presented in (Soutar & Close, 1997). It is a place for examining the concepts of culture (Foster, 1988). In other words it is an opportunity for us to recognise, to contemplate, and to evaluate ourselves, and the meanings we derive from interfacing with others. Turner (1982: 11) asserts,

(theatrical performances)...probe a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desacralise its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggest remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known 'world'.

Turner (in Schechner & Appel, 1990: 1) further argues that cultures are "...fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves" in theatrical performances, and the performances present "...the central meanings, values and goals of a culture... 'in action' ...to shape and explain behaviour." Thus, Turner understands that Theatre plays an important role in the social interaction and communication between humans. McCarthy *et al.* (2004: 44) also believe that Theatre, amongst other art forms, is a mode of communication solely concerned with the human experience. Bennett (1997: 105) goes a step further to suggest that audiences themselves are aware that Theatre is vital in "socio-cultural processes".

³ Swartz (1997: 166-167) in *Culture and Power* summarises Bourdieu's theories of Distinction and Taste by explaining "Differences in basic conditions of existence produce 'a basic opposition between the tastes of luxury and the tastes of necessity' between actors whose economic circumstances permit the pursuit of status distinctions and those who can afford no such luxury... Since the dominant class possesses a high volume of capital, it develops a 'taste of freedom' from the mundane material necessities and practical urgencies of everyday life. This 'sense of distinction' is characterised by an 'aesthetic disposition' in its 'distant, detached or casual disposition towards the world of other people'".

Webb, Shirato and Danaher (2002:154) also condense Bourdieu's thoughts on the subject by stating "Art is, Bourdieu insists, part of the field of power so when it comes to the field of cultural production, the 'cultural arbitrary' ensures the things that are valued by dominant people, institutions and events are valued (or at least in principle) by everyone – whether they actually like them, or use them, or not." The authors go further to explain "Bourdieu's notion is that 'culture' is the domain of those who, by virtue of their class, status, and education, are possessed of 'cultivated' tastes, and able, by virtue of the same sorts of capital, to inscribe these tastes as being at the same time natural, and the markers of a natural superiority" (Webb, Shirato & Danaher, 2002: 148).

⁴ *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, 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. 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 goal of *Talking Theatre* was to make contact with regional non-theatre-goers and to uncover their attitudes to the performing arts industry and in particular to the fourteen participating PACs; including their programming, pricing, promotion, and facilities. By listening to the views of the selected participants in each of the regions, the PACs were placed in a stronger position to make effective

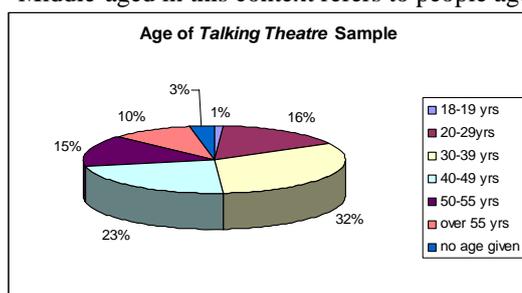
decisions to positively impact on this significant segment of the community – interested non-theatre-goers.

For participants in *Talking Theatre*, the research provided them with the opportunity to directly experience live performances in a theatre setting. This introduction worked to break down some of the barriers that have prevented their attendance in the past. The post-performance group data-gathering sessions provided a safe and friendly discussion environment which assisted the participants, via self-reflection and engagement with others' ideas, to learn about theatre and theatre-going.

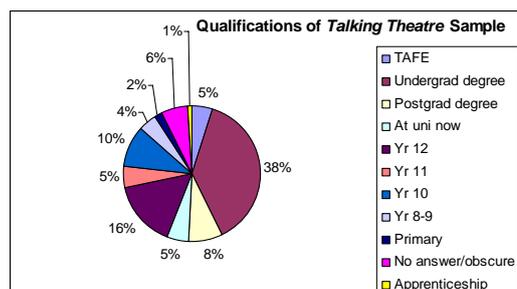
Quality feedback from interested non-theatre-goers to the PACs, combined with participants' direct engagement with a range of performances, the PACs, and the perspectives of other non-theatre-goers, created a meaningful two-way dialogue that helped each party to learn from the other and to feel valued 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. Furthermore, the research findings and recommendations guided the State and Federal Government funding agencies' future interaction with the PACs and with diverse regional communities to continue to improve participation levels of Australians in the arts.

A professional development component of the *Talking Theatre* project sought to 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.

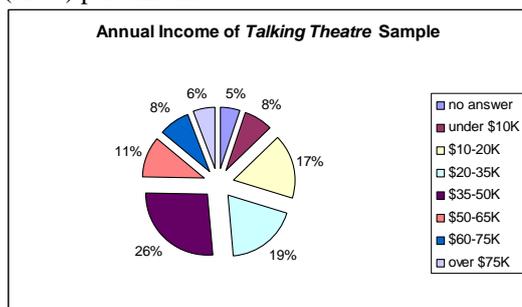
⁵ Middle-aged in this context refers to people aged 40-55 years.



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⁷ Medium income equates to \$30 000-\$60 000 (AUS) per annum. High income equates to \$60 000+ (AUS) per annum.



⁸ This paper sees the power of family as broader than that derived from being a member of a particular family or in other words by inclusion in strong, well-respected family networks (Fowler, 1997: 5). It instead understands the power of family upon the individual as being determined by the actions of its members which influence one's understanding of the social world and the actions one takes in the future.

⁹ The Northern Australian Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA) is a large regional theatre network formed in 1983 as an administrative support group focused on the activities and requirements of regional performing arts centres (PACs) throughout northern Australia. The great distances between the individual PACs and between northern Australia and the country's southern states (where much of the resources for the arts were 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 size from 9,000 to 200,000 people. The locales vary from tropical, sub-tropical, hinterland, grassland, and desert, with a plethora of industries (eg. rural, mining, manufacturing, education, health, and tourism) that employ the residents. Each PAC differs in size (venue, seating capacity, staffing, and funding), which directly impacts on theatre programming, promotion and marketing, and audience research and development.

¹⁰ Typically the results showed that all or most of the participants could relate strongly to some of the performances they attended, while very few of the participants could relate to some of the other performances they attended. This finding ensured the overall result of 56% of the entire sample could relate to someone or something in the performances. Examples of productions most participants could relate to were: *Zigzag Street*, *Last Cab to Darwin*, and *Second Childhood*. These plays presented issues, dilemmas, triumphs and places that could be easily recognised as Australian; suburban and regional, as well as pertaining to the personal.