

Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre:

Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres
and 58 Productions



commissioned by Theatre Bay Area
report by Alan Brown and Rebecca Ratzkin, WolfBrown

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Overview of the Study

- With funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and other funders, Theatre Bay Area set out in 2010 to support a cohort of 18 diverse theatres in assessing the impacts of their productions on audiences. To facilitate this assessment, Theatre Bay Area commissioned the research firm WolfBrown to develop a survey methodology based on their extensive experience with impact assessment.
 - **A summary of previous research on audience impact by WolfBrown and other researchers can be found at www.intrinsicimpact.org. A description of the constructs of “readiness to receive” and “intrinsic impact” may be found on pages 13-14.**
- Theatres were selected through a competitive application process, in partnership with local agencies or funders in each of the six regions covered by the study: The San Francisco Bay Area, Greater Los Angeles, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York City, Washington DC, and Philadelphia.
- The project represents a critical step forward in the theatre field towards encouraging audiences to provide meaningful feedback on the art itself, and towards providing the 18 theatres and the theatre community more generally with new tools to gather and interpret feedback on their creative output.
- Following a planning phase from May to November 2010, data was collected between November 2010 and September 2011, and analyzed between September 2011 and January 2012.
- Individual theatres were provided with proprietary access to their own survey results through an online dashboard reporting tool co-developed by WolfBrown and Theatre Bay Area, with the assistance of Baker Richards Consulting in the UK and Jacobson Consulting Applications in the US.
- Engaging the individual theatres in a meaningful discussion of their impact results was the primary goal of the study. This report captures cross-site learnings and larger patterns of results, in order for the field to benefit from the study.

- Analysis cohorts covered in this report include:
 - **SELF-REPORTED VARIABLES:** age, gender, ticket type, role in the decision process, annual frequency of attendance at the host theatre, motivations for attending, and pre- and post-performance engagement
 - **ADMINISTRATIVE VARIABLES:** size of house, percentage of house sold, and production attributes (e.g., plays vs. musicals, family-friendly, classic vs. contemporary, etc.)
- This report was prepared to complement a larger report prepared by Theatre Bay Area on the intrinsic impact project.
 - **This report includes only a minor focus on comparing results across the 18 theatres or 58 specific productions, in order to avoid making inappropriate comparisons between theatres with different audiences, different venues, and different markets. Results from this study should not be extrapolated to represent all audiences for plays and musicals, since the samples of theatres and productions were not designed to be representative of the entire theatre field.**
- Working with the 18 theatres was a truly rewarding experience. They were invested and dedicated to the success of this project, and it is through their good efforts that this report is available for the field.

Key Themes and Observations

- **High response rates** (45%, on average) suggest that theatre patrons are willing, able and ready to provide meaningful feedback on their artistic experiences. The quality of responses to open-ended questions was high. The investment of time and psychic energy on the part of patrons in completing almost 19,000 surveys was staggering.
- While the purpose of the study was to engage theatres around impact assessment, patrons also benefit from the **process of providing feedback**, since, in taking the survey, they are forced to articulate a critical reaction to the art.
 - In future efforts it will be important to provide respondents with immediate feedback on how their results compare to those of other patrons, in order to complete the circle of learning and encourage future cooperation with surveys of a similar nature. This feedback might take the form of online graphs and charts, dynamic word clouds projected onto a wall in the lobby, or re-publishing selected audience comments on the theatre's website (e.g., "here's what people are saying about last night's performance").
- Results bring to light what might be considered the **central riddle of impact**: On average, single-ticket buyers report significantly higher impacts than subscribers.
 - Is there a sense of "novelty" or "newness" that increases impact for low-frequency attenders?
 - Why are more frequent theatregoers less satisfied, on average? Are they more sophisticated, and therefore harder to please? Certainly they are much more familiar with theatre in general.
 - If first-timers and low-frequency attenders are more satisfied than high-frequency attenders, on average, why are they not attending more frequently? This seems counter-intuitive, and might speak to an underlying driver of the "churn" phenomenon. It seems to suggest that satisfaction with the artistic experience, alone, is not enough to drive repeat purchase. If excellent artistic work is not enough to retain satisfied patrons, what is?
- Respondents were asked to choose three from a list of 11 reasons why people attend theatre performances. The top three **motivations** are "to relax and escape," "to be emotionally moved," and "to discover something new." Younger respondents are more socially motivated, and are more likely to attend "for educational purposes" suggesting a personal connection to the art form. High frequency patrons (89% of whom are subscribers) are much more likely to cite emotional and intellectual reasons for attending, whereas low frequency attenders

(87% of whom are single-ticket buyers) are motivated by production-specific factors (e.g., “to see the work of a specific artist”). Although many low-frequency attenders are regular theatregoers, they are “picking and choosing” the programs they want to see at the host theatre. Among the least frequent attenders (i.e., those attending the host theatre for the first time in a year or more), 35% came “because someone else invited me,” illustrating **the power of social context** to drive attendance among infrequent attenders.

- Overall, motivations can vary dramatically from production to production, suggesting a need to carefully align marketing messages with motivations on a production-by-production basis.
- Younger respondents (age 15-24) reported lower levels of familiarity with theatre in general, but higher levels of familiarity with the playwright and the cast. Overall, these and other survey results suggest that young theatregoers are more likely than older theatregoers to be personally involved in theatre through acting, writing, etc., and are prime candidates for engagement.
- Women reported higher impacts than men across all 58 productions, in particular feeling “emotionally charged” after a performance, and “reflecting on one’s opinions.” Some of this difference may be explained by the fact that women were more likely than men to be sole decision-makers (see next point).
- Decision makers (i.e., those who say that “I made the decision to attend”) reported higher levels of context and familiarity, and are more likely to prepare. All of this ties into generally **higher levels of anticipation and impacts among decision-makers** (presumably ticket buyers) compared to those who attend with them.
 - In some ways, decision-makers act as cultural guides to others. How might theatres help reinforce and reward this nurturing behavior?
 - These findings also suggest a problem with surveys that only reach ticket buyers, which bias results in favor of the more knowledgeable and engaged audience members.
- Results were analyzed across different types of productions, with intuitive results. **Plays** generated higher levels of intellectual stimulation and social bridging outcomes, while **musicals** generated higher captivation levels, higher levels of feeling “emotional charged,” higher levels of aesthetic validation and social connectedness with others in the audience. Productions with a **comedic element** tended to precipitate higher social outcomes, suggesting that laughing together creates a social bond that is less prevalent in more serious work. As

would be expected, productions involving **challenging material** elicited stronger intellectual impacts.

- Several theatres within the sample presented the same, or similar, productions. Both Arena Stage and Berkeley Repertory Theatre surveyed audiences at *Ruined* (different productions of the same play), yielding strikingly similar results. The same two theatres presented the same production of Anna Deavere Smith's *Let Me Down Easy*, with similar patterns of results, but a much higher magnitude of impacts reported by single-ticket buyers at surveyed performances late in the Berkeley run. Comparison of results between two plays by Tennessee Williams (*The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* and *Camino Real*) point to the diversity of impacts within one playwright's body of work.
- One of the key questions used in the protocol asks respondents, "Did you leave the performance with questions you would have liked to have asked the actors, director or playwright?" Overall, 35% of respondents left the performance with unanswered questions, and 98% of these people responded to a follow-up open-ended question, "What were one or two of your questions?", resulting in an enormous body of qualitative data about what was on their minds. Respondents who reported having questions tended to have higher levels of familiarity with the playwright/composer or with the cast, but lower levels of familiarity with the story of the play. In other words, unfamiliar work generates more questions, which stands to reason.
 - **Being able to formulate questions about a theatre production you've attended is a form of critical thinking, and relates to positive impacts. Patrons who are not able to articulate their questions or seek answers miss an important opportunity to make meaning from their experience. Analysis of open-ended responses suggests groupings of questions - some around the "why" of the production, some around the "how" of the production. Helping patrons achieve the "moment of curatorial insight" (i.e., the "aha" moment when understanding dawns) should be the focus of pre- and post-performance engagement efforts.**
- Reading previews, reviews and social media comments prior to attending has a small but significant effect on increasing anticipation levels, but does not correlate with higher impacts. A much stronger relationship was found between anticipation and respondents' levels of familiarity with the story, cast, and playwright. All three of these familiarities contribute significantly to anticipation. In other words, as familiarity rises, so do anticipation levels. Familiarity with the story of the production contributes twice the predictive value compared to familiarity with the cast or the playwright.

- This suggests something intuitive about theatre participation: as theatregoers advance along their arc of involvement with the art form, their levels of anticipation and involvement rise.
 - It also suggests that marketing efforts focusing on building familiarity with the story are more likely to build anticipation levels, as opposed to marketing efforts that focus on the playwright or cast (except in the case of stars).
- A strong predictive relationship was found between the intensity of discussion that patrons have with each other and the main indicator of intellectual stimulation (“To what extent did you gain new insight or learning?”). Respondents who reported having an “intense exchange” after the performance reported an average score of 3.7 on the “insight or learning” indicator, compared to an average score of 3.2 for those who reported a “casual exchange.” An even stronger relationship was observed between the intensity of discussion and the indicator of self-reflection, “To what extent did the performance cause you to reflect on your own opinions or beliefs?” Similarly, structured post-performance engagement activities such as talkbacks were found to have significant predictive power over “insight or learning” outcomes, although it is impossible to prove a causal relationship.
 - Results clearly indicate the benefits of post-performance engagement in terms of increased intellectual outcomes.
- An open-ended question asking respondents to articulate in their own words the emotions they were feeling as they left the theatre provides a nuanced view of the complexity of emotions that a theatre performance can have on an individual and on an audience. Several word clouds included in the report illustrate how different performances take audiences on unique emotional journeys. For example, respondents to Woolly Mammoth’s production of *Booty Candy* were predominantly happy, sad, confused, entertained and dissatisfied. From an impact perspective, being “*affected*” is what matters (i.e., deeper-felt emotion leads to deeper impact, even if that emotion is anger or sadness). Individual theatres, however, can use this open-ended question to compare their own suppositions about what emotions their audience members are feeling with the reality, and to make judgments about the prevalence of one emotion or another in the context of the artistic work.
- Overall the most helpful summative indicator of impact is: “When you look back at this performance a year from now, how much of an impression do you think will be left?” because it tracks most closely with the range of impacts. The two productions that garnered the very highest levels of summative impact could not be more different: *Avenue Q* (a raunchy adults-only musical with puppets) and *Ruined* (a dark, wrenching drama about female genital mutilation in the Congo).

- The following diagram illustrates key relationships between readiness, impact and loyalty, based on the totality of the data set. In general, these results corroborate and expand upon the original impact assessment work from 2006.

