A GUIDE TO POST-SHOW CONVERSATIONS
By Nadia Hopkins and StageSource

What’s the purpose of a post-show conversation?
Post-show conversations are becoming an increasingly valuable tool for audience members to appreciate, consider, question, and even confront the theatre they’ve just witnessed. For theatre with a socially-driven mission, actively finding the themes of a play in our own lives and communities can be the first step towards change.

“A post-show is an opportunity to bridge the gap between audience, storyteller, and story. I think a lot of times audience members see a play and they want to talk about it, and it gives the space to have a dialogue about what we’ve just seen....”
— Pascale Florestal: Director, Educator, and Dramaturge

“My favorite types of post-shows are ones that are set up in a way that the artists behind the piece feel further their impulse for the show.”
— Robert Duffley: Editor and Assistant Dramaturg, American Repertory Theatre

TIP #1: Most of the work happens before the conversation
A post-show is a direct reflection of the theatre’s values. A thought-provoking post-show requires outreach to bring the people in the room whose stories are reflected in the play. It means thinking specifically about who will be leading the conversation, and which demographics need to be a part of the discussion. It calls for providing resources or inviting experts to discuss themes in the play. It also requires finding a facilitator who can create a skeleton plan for the discussion so it can run smoothly. Below are some facilitator methods to bring in more voices, especially those who are less inclined to speak in large groups, and to keep the conversation engaging and productive.

• Give a minute of silent reflection to process thoughts before diving in.
• Start with one immediate word responses from the audience.
• Brake the audience into smaller groups, and providing one discussion question.
• Have the audience write down their questions, and have the moderator select from those.
• Create awareness of others in the room by starting with a non verbal survey.
  “Raise your hand if you believe...” etc.

TIP #2: Make a Contract With Your Audience
By explicitly laying out the goal of the post-show, audience members may be more willing to dive into the discussion. A contract is a list of agreements which hopes to create a space where people can speak honestly. It should call in voices, it should acknowledge privilege, and it should also include norms concerning language usage, particularly if the play contains slurs. A contract could include guidelines such as “use I statements” “step-up, step-down,” “trust intent, name impact,” and “expect and accept non-closure.”

“Ultimately, a more generalized purpose of a post-show conversation is to move beyond the experience of the actual production... theatre needs to move beyond just going to see a play and having some thoughts about it. I think a post-show is the very first minimal step away from that.”
— Tatiana Isabel-Gil, actor, playwright and dramaturg
TIP #3: Maintain Multiplicity Over Fragility

It is not the job of the facilitator to provide a space for those with privilege to argue against the politics of the play presented. Instead, it is the facilitator’s job to open the space for multiplicity by listening to a range of perspectives. Furthermore, the facilitator must be explicitly conscious of who they are calling on and whose voices are being overshadowed—a play about people of color should not have a post-show full of white people expressing guilt, confusion and rage. Instead, it should be a place for active listening. If such a play has an almost all white audience, or if white people are the only ones speaking, the facilitator should be equipped to advocate for voices that are not a part of the conversation.

“My ideal post-show is for the audience to ask questions, maybe of each other, maybe of the performers, and for them to listen to pieces of the story that they hadn’t yet heard, and to let that context inform their understanding of the play.”
— Devika Ranjan: Resident Director, Albany Park Project

TIP #4: Limit Discussion of "Enjoyment" and "Agreement"

A post-show is not a lecture hall, and the perspectives and lives of marginalized groups in a play are very real and not a thesis to argue for or against. It can be easy for a post-show conversation to center on the interpretations of people in a place of privilege. To confront this issue, it can be helpful to operate under the underlying question “the play said what it was trying to say, now what will you do with it?” This assumption by the facilitator puts trust in both the playwright as well as the audience, by creating action-based conversation.

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TIP #5: Think Local, Action-Based, and Relevant

For some people, a post-show is one of the few instances they have for conversation about injustice that is not online. Because of its nature, theatre is often a community-based experience. By posing questions about how injustices brought up in the play affect people’s communities, it may be easier to find common ground and discover actions. This may include organizations to donate to or work with, local election information, and new language to bring into their own day-to-day conversations. Bringing up the local manifestations of issues, such as racism, that are reflected in the play reminds the audience, particularly the white audience members, that the play does not exist in a vacuum and puts it into context with the world/reality outside of the theatre’s walls.

“The goal is really to get a sense of the local resonance of the story that’s just been told onstage... The post-show discussion is a good place to have [locals] speak to why it’s relevant to our experience as people living in this city.”
— Kevin Becerra: Engagement Associate Producer, Arts Emerson

“I think I love [post-shows] because they are the hardest thing to do, it’s people managing and that’s an impossible task because you cannot predict what you are getting into. I love knowing that it was successful because it’s so very difficult...”
— Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood: pursuing MFA in dramaturgy from UMass Amherst