

Triple Play: Phase 2 Summary

Triangulations on New Work: Playwrights and Theatres in Conversation with Audiences

Participating Theatres and Playwrights

Arena Stage - Jacqueline Lawton
Center Theatre Group - Dan O'Brien
Cutting Ball Theater - Andrew Saito
dog & pony dc - Nicole Jost
East West Players - Ken Narasaki
Goodman Theatre - Martin Zimmerman
Playwrights Horizons - Madeleine George
Public Theater - Mona Mansour
Woolly Mammoth - Nilaja Sun

Background

This report summarizes findings from the most recent phase of research in an ongoing investigation of the triangular relationship between playwrights, theatres, and audiences that is being conducted by Theatre Bay Area (TBA) and the Theatre Development Fund (TDF). Having previously broached this topic in several commissioned papers and in conversations with members of the theatre community in six US cities, TBA and TDF launched the latest phase of research with funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in the summer of 2014.

The general approach in this phase of work was to engage playwrights and theatre personnel in a process of conducting structured qualitative research on audiences for new plays. Specifically, the research sought to directly involve playwrights in conversations with audience members in order to build a foundational understanding of how and why audience members seek out new plays, how they engage with the work, and what types of interaction with playwrights would deepen their experiences and strengthen their relationships with living dramatists and the theatres that present their work. The “action research” approach taken here casts those who can change the field (i.e., playwrights and theatre administrators) in the role of researchers with the goal of inspiring more nuanced and informed discussions at a convening of theatre professionals in January 2015.

Research Design

TDF and TBA recruited eleven theatres from six cities around the US to participate in the research project. (Two of the smaller theatres later dropped out of the study, after realizing that they lacked the staff and resources to complete the required components of the project). Each theatre then enlisted a playwright as a partner in this inquiry. The playwright-theatre teams were supposed to conduct four one-on-one interviews and two focus groups with six to eight audience members each. Due to logistical challenges related

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to recruitment of interviewees, these target numbers were not met at all participating research sites.

The theatres recruited participants into the study from their existing patron databases. For the one-on-one interviews, the objective was to recruit participants who had seen at least one new play in the past season, but who are not “new play aficionados.” The focus group participants were selected from among the single ticket buyers for an upcoming performance of a new play.

All of the conversations were attended both by the playwrights and theatre personnel, with one of them leading the discussion and the other taking notes. The findings were recorded in short written reports. The reports from all of the research sites were merged into two documents (one for the interviews and one for the focus groups) and shared with all of the participants. Two webinars were held in December 2014—one for the playwrights and one for the theatre personnel—in which the findings and overall experience of the process were discussed.

As a final step in the analysis leading up to the January 2015 symposium at Arts Emerson, the playwrights have been asked to respond in writing to the following set of prompts, which grew out of central themes that emerged in the two webinars.

Prompts for Final Reflection Papers

1. How do you feel about the observation that many (though certainly not all) of the interview/focus group participants don't seem to know (or much care) who wrote the plays that they see?
2. In what ways do you think playwrights could/should try to establish ongoing relationships with audience members who attend their plays? What role might theatres' marketing and communications departments play in this? Why would theatres encourage audience members to follow the work of playwrights whose work they may or may not present again?
3. Several respondents expressed the desire to engage with playwrights informally “over drinks.” There seems to be an interest in getting to know the playwright personally, rather than in a formal Q&A session about the play that was performed. What do you make of this? While it may not be possible to have drinks with every audience member, are there ways in which you could imagine engaging with audience members on a more personal level?
4. One striking observation was that many of the respondents requested video content and other forms of information and engagement that are actually already being provided by theatres. Why do you think there is this disconnect between audience members and the resources they are seeking? What could you or the theatres that

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present your work do to make the resources that are available more relevant and accessible to audience members?

5. While some audience members avoid finding out too much about a play they're about to see, a number of research participants indicated that they're not worried about "spoilers." In fact, information about the plot and the characters was frequently cited as the most useful information in determining whether a particular production is right for them. How do you feel about providing information about your work upfront? Is there a way to do this that would enhance the impact of your work rather than detract from it?
6. Having conducted the interviews and focus groups, read each others' reports, and discussed the findings with your colleagues, what are the main things you will take away from this project? How will this experience inform the relationships you build with the theatres that present your work and with your audiences in the future?