

**Article 6****DOES THE 'SHAKESPEARE' IN SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK MATTER? AN INVESTIGATION OF ATTENDANCES AT AND ATTITUDES TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK FESTIVAL****By Rebecca Scollen (Australia)****Abstract**

In 2010, the annual University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Shakespeare in the Park Festival (SitPF) was held in Queens Park, Toowoomba, Queensland for the seventh consecutive year. This large outdoor theatre event was established to encourage greater attendances to performances of Shakespeare's plays by making them more accessible to the public. Attendance levels at SitPF have grown by 170 per cent since its inception in 2004. In 2009, audience research was conducted to ascertain the barriers to attendance, as well as patrons' opinions of SitPF. Results showed that the primary deterrent to attendance was the fear that the Shakespearean content would not be understood or enjoyed. Only one-third of the 2009 SitPF audience, and of the repeat SitPF patrons, attended primarily because of the Shakespearean content. Interestingly, the Shakespearean content did not play a significant part in the overall enjoyment of the event for either type of SitPF audience.

**Keywords**

Shakespeare; audience research; outdoor festival; attendance; regional Queensland

**Author's Biography**

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## DOES THE 'SHAKESPEARE' IN SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK MATTER? AN INVESTIGATION OF ATTENDANCES AT AND ATTITUDES TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND SHAKESPEARE IN THE PARK FESTIVAL

In 2010, the annual University of Southern Queensland's (USQ) Shakespeare in the Park Festival (SitPF) was held in Queens Park, Toowoomba, Queensland for the seventh consecutive year. This popular regional event attracts loyal regular patrons and new audiences each year from Toowoomba and surrounding townships within a four-hour radius. The organisers' ambition to make the work of Shakespeare more accessible to the public appears to have been achieved because attendances have grown 170 per cent since the festival's inception. Yet is it the Shakespearean theme that entices attendance and ensures enjoyment, or is it incidental to patronage or even a deterrent to greater levels of participation?

Audience research has been conducted since 2006 to gain insight into patrons' expectations and perceptions of SitPF. In 2009, audience research also included non-attenders and regular SitPF audiences who had attended three or more SitPF festivals in the past. The investigation illustrated that the primary deterrent to attendance for those who had never been to SitPF before was the fear that the Shakespearean content would not be understood or enjoyed. Only one-third of the 2009 SitPF audience, and of the repeat SitPF patrons, attended primarily because of the Shakespearean content. Even more interesting was the finding that the Shakespearean content did not play a significant part in the overall enjoyment of the event for either type of SitPF audience. Furthermore, when the 2010 SitPF production of *Twelfth Night* was performed indoors due to poor weather, audience members' reasons for attendance altered and attendance dropped significantly as a result. According to the results of the audience research conducted that year, it appears that when Shakespeare is in the park his work is almost incidental to attendance, but the outdoor event is popular nonetheless. When Shakespeare is in the theatre, his work is the primary reason audiences attend so the number of patrons present is significantly reduced.

### University of Southern Queensland Shakespeare in the Park Festival

The USQ Shakespeare in the Park Festival commenced in 2004 as an attempt to make the works of Shakespeare more accessible to the wider community by presenting live performances in the city's central park. For over 30 years, USQ has presented live theatre at its 257-seat amphitheatre style Arts Theatre, located on its Toowoomba campus. The creative arts program prides itself on providing practice-based learning opportunities for its undergraduate students, by directly including them in well-resourced productions for the community to attend. Although thousands of audience members attend the USQ Arts Theatre each year to experience diverse theatrical productions, it was decided to shift the annual Shakespearean offering off-campus to a more central location.

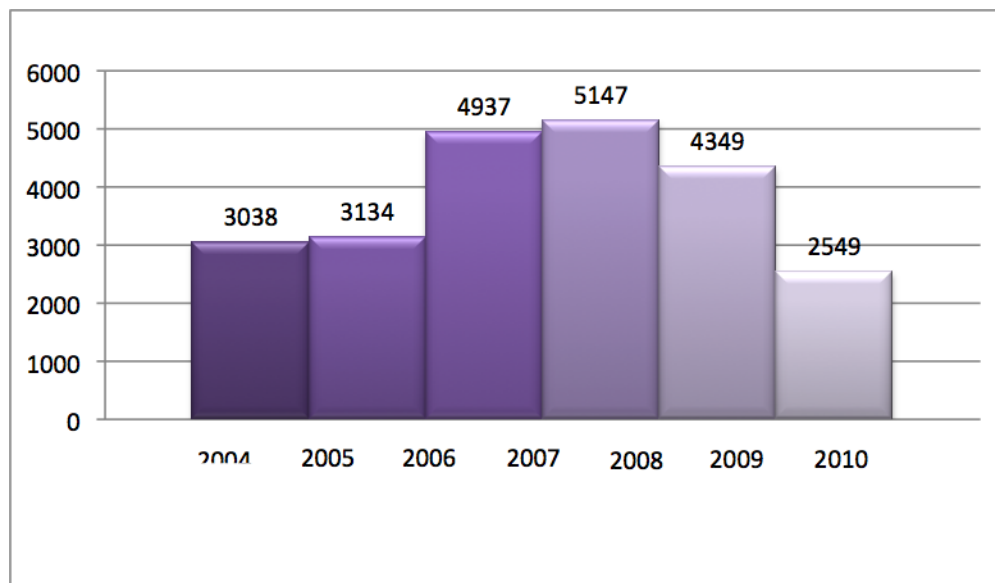
It was hoped that placing Shakespeare in Queens Park would engage a broader audience by making the Bard's works seem less intimidating and more enjoyable. The casual atmosphere, beautiful natural setting and central position could be appealing to people who normally would not attend indoor theatre productions. Typical non-theatre-goers are intimidated by 'the theatre' because they sense it is a formal and elitist activity attended by 'stuffy' older patrons. One comment made by a non-theatre-goer involved in the regional Talking Theatre project sums this up: 'I always thought theatre was for cigar-smoking old people.' (Scollen 2007b) They are concerned they will not fit in with the theatre-going crowd, and they will appear foolish because they have not dressed appropriately or they may have trouble understanding the play (Scheff Bernstein 2007; Scollen 2007b). Non-theatre-goers also have difficulty convincing their friends or family to attend theatre productions, and they have no intention of attending on their own (Scollen 2008a; Instinct and Reason 2010). In contrast, most people have visited parks for leisure and associate them with relaxation, social interaction and informality. The park conjures up memories and feelings from times spent engaged in recreational pursuits. Through placing theatre – particularly live productions of Shakespeare – in this space any negativity conjured up by notions of 'high art' or cultural elitism are reduced. When presented in a public park, the theatre event can be associated with relaxation and enjoyment by non-theatre-goers:

Many modern-day festivals revive processional drama's engagement with streets and recreational spaces and fulfil a desire to appropriate public space for play. Shakespeare festivals in Australia are nearly always constructed in such terms. Fairs, feasting, open-air performances and street processions mark Shakespeare festivals as family entertainment, designed to attract broad community involvement and to downplay associations with 'high art'. (Gaby 2007: 176)

Queens Park is a regularly used public space in the centre of Toowoomba.<sup>1</sup> Numerous community events take place there, including live music, multicultural fairs, sport, markets, Carnival of Flowers celebrations and carols by candlelight. SitPF provides the only live theatre in this space; however, the park is used for other arts and cultural activities, such as an annual music festival, outdoor cinema screenings and the circus. Families and individuals also frequent the park for exercise, picnics and play. It features large shade trees as well as open recreation areas. Queens Park was established in 1871 (French 2009), and has been used as a gathering place for the local community since that time. The long-standing positive public engagement with this park was the main reason SitPF was moved to this space over other outdoor venues available in Toowoomba.

SitPF is presented each year in March.<sup>2</sup> It is the only annual live theatre event presented outdoors in the region. The two-week annual season includes eight live performances of a main-stage production of one of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>3</sup> The productions are well resourced, with elaborate costumes and sets situated on a large outdoor stage. The plays are directed by either a USQ theatre lecturer or an external guest director.<sup>4</sup> SitPF also typically features a secondary school workshop day in the park, and an additional activity that alters each year (such as an adaptation of Shakespeare's play for primary school touring during the festival season; late night cabaret; pre-show performances by community members; breakfast in the park with wandering minstrels and other artists; and community fora). SitPF has a casual, family-friendly atmosphere, with BYO chair or blanket, food and drink. Beverage and food vendors are also present on site.

SitPF boasts the highest levels of audience attendance compared with any other live theatre<sup>5</sup> (indoors or outdoors) in the region.<sup>6</sup> Attendance levels range from 300 to 1000 patrons per performance. As mentioned previously by 2008 SitPF's audience had grown by 170 per cent. The 2008 season of *Romeo and Juliet* attracted a record number of 5147 patrons. This surge in attendance figures was anticipated, as *Romeo and Juliet* is continually on the secondary school curriculum and is a play well known to the wider community. It was also the fifth consecutive year of the SitPF and it had developed a loyal following. SitPF attendance figures since 2004 are shown in Figure 1.



### Figure 1: SitPF attendance figures since 2004

As ascertained via ticket sales records, and by the results of audience questionnaires completed at the site from 2006 to 2008, each year's SitPF audience includes approximately 30 per cent high school students and their teachers. Shakespeare continues to be taught in school drama and English classes, so the opportunity to take students to a contemporary live production to complement their teaching is attractive to many teachers in the region. The remainder of the audience tends to be professional women aged 31–50 who attend as groups of friends, or with their families. This is a common finding for live theatre productions around the country because this demographic is the most likely to be interested in participating in or attending the arts (Colmar Brunton 2006). A more recent report commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts also found that those less engaged in the arts were more likely to be male (Instinct and Reason 2010: 21). Around 30 per cent of the total audience travel to Toowoomba to attend SitPF (typically living within a four-hour driving radius of the city), as it is the only theatre festival of its kind west of the state's capital, Brisbane. Results from the audience questionnaires show the most enjoyed aspects of the festival are the spectacular sets (62 per cent of the sample), costumes (61 per cent) and the casual outdoor setting (50 per cent).

In 2009, the organisers of the festival believed it was important to increase their audience research commitment to better understand the community's perception of SitPF and to discover ways to further improve the event in 2010 and sustain it into the future. As it happened, in 2009 the rate of audience growth stopped and organisers assumed this was because *The Tempest* (performed that year) was not as well known to the public as the previous plays presented. Audience numbers further decreased in 2010 because, for the first time since SitPF began, a number of performances of *Twelfth Night* were cancelled due to extreme wet and windy weather. The entire production shifted to an indoor theatre venue in the second week of the season so *Twelfth Night* could be performed on four occasions. As a result of the weather conditions, cancellation of performances and the move indoors, audience attendances were down by more than 50 per cent in 2010. However, it was heartening to know that, prior to the wet weather, ticket sales had been at their highest in the two weeks prior to opening in March, compared with the equivalent period for all previous SitPFs.

### Methodology

To determine whether the festival organisers' strategies to meet their goals<sup>7</sup> for SitPF were met, and to identify ways to continue to grow and improve the festival, audience research has been conducted since 2006. Audience research typically gathers demographic and psychographic data to build a picture of who an audience constitutes and what their attitudes and interests are (Close and Donovan 1998). It is the 'systematic collection and analysis of useful information ... to facilitate practical decision-making' (Dickman 2005: 1). This information is normally obtained by the completion of closed format questionnaires, and can readily be generated into statistics for analysis. By building a demographic and psychographic profile of the audience, we can begin to guess how they might respond to performance. Knowing the background of audiences prior to gathering their reception of a performance helps to place their reactions within a context that ensures their responses become more meaningful.

The field of theatre audience reception seeks to understand the perceptions and reactions of audience members to performance and to the theatrical event as a whole. It 'essentially deals with the spectator's intellectual and emotional experiences in the theatre' (Martin and Sauter 1995: 29). In recent decades, the spectator or audience member has been considered an essential element within theatre. Many authors have written about theatre audiences and the important role they play in the event; they include Roger Deldime (1988), Paul Thom (1993), Susan Bennett (1997), Wilmar Sauter (2000), Henri Schoenmakers and John Tulloch (2004), Hans van Maanen (2004), Peter Eversmann (2004), Rebecca Scollen (2007a), Bruce McConachie (2008), Helen Freshwater (2009) and Matthew Reason (2010). Kier Elam (1980: 97) states that: 'It is with the spectator ... that theatrical communication begins and ends.' It is generally acknowledged that the theatrical performance is a two-way communication process between the performer and the audience. This co-creation of meaning between the two parties has led to increased interest in who the spectator is and what they experience while engaged in theatrical performance.

Such knowledge helps to inform theatre makers about how their work has been interpreted, engaged with

and understood. This information removes some of the guesswork or supposition of the theatre makers as to how their work was perceived by directly accessing audiences' responses. March and Thompson (1996) assert that artists or arts organisations cannot really understand their product until they know how the consumer or audience has perceived it. In turn, this knowledge can aid in the development of future work, as practitioners come to appreciate the audience and its vital role in the process. Further to this, audience reception studies bring insights into the act of reception and of the audience itself, which heightens awareness of the ways in which people engage, make meaning and recall experiences. As Niemi (1988) explains, research into this area not only gives greater insight into the experiences of the individual, but also gives much-needed theoretical attention to art to demonstrate its importance in humanity's social and cultural world.

Yet there has been little published about contemporary audiences of Shakespeare and of their reactions to his plays in production. John Tulloch's (2005) investigation of young audiences' responses to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed in Penrith, New South Wales, demonstrates how audience research can provide insight into the ways in which teenagers engage with Shakespeare. The results have implications for audience development strategies as much as for the identification of audiences' critical engagement with the work.

Audience development not only strives to increase audience numbers but to increase the range of people who constitute an audience (Hill, O'Sullivan and O'Sullivan 1995), and to develop the community's knowledge of and interest in theatre (Kotler and Scheff 1997). There is growing evidence of the importance of motivational, experiential and attitudinal research as a means of both shoring up loyalty among regular arts audiences and attracting new audiences. A significant number of academic arts and arts marketing publications in Australia, the United Kingdom and New Zealand have documented theatre, museum and gallery projects now engaging front-of-house staff in qualitative research aimed at measuring how values, emotions, show experience and service quality affect overall customer satisfaction and attendance intentions (Scollen 2007a; Barlow and Shibli 2007; Hume, Sullivan Mort and Winzar 2007; Slater 2007; Boyle 2007; Werner 2003; Davies 2005; McCarthy et al. 2001). Recent research findings (Scollen 2007a, 2008a, 2009) further this argument by demonstrating that to build new audiences, organisations need to understand their target markets and discover how they experience product before they can make successful decisions about disseminating advertising and choosing programming. It is generally conceded that monitoring audience attitudes and experiences is a vital component of 'best practice' arts marketing and product development.

Although there has been some uptake of audience reception as a tool to increase knowledge of audiences by those working in the Australian performing arts industry, the majority of research conducted by the industry seeks traditional demographic data rather than experiential information (Soutar and Close 1997; Australia Council for the Arts 2002). With the exception of a few recent academic articles (Scollen 2007a, 2008b, 2009), it also appears rare for organisations to attempt to find out what non-theatre-goers think of their services or of the theatre industry in general. Certainly it is possible – and useful – to generate a profile of non-attenders and the barriers to attendance by applying audience research methods.

## **2009 Audience Study of SitPF: Methods**

### ***Non-SitPF attenders***

Members of the public aged eighteen years and over who had never attended SitPF were encouraged to complete an online questionnaire located on the SitPF website ([www.usq.edu.au/shakespeare](http://www.usq.edu.au/shakespeare)). The closed-format questionnaire sought to generate a basic demographic profile of non-attenders, and to discover their reasons for non-attendance, their expectations of SitPF and their other recreational/cultural patronage. Non-attenders were made aware of the questionnaire through local media coverage of the research, and by information available at the SitPF website. An opportunity to win one complimentary family pass to the 2009 production of *The Tempest* was offered to encourage the public to complete the questionnaire. Such an incentive was likely to only be attractive to those who had considered attending SitPF but had previously elected not to. A small sample of 34 people completed the questionnaire and statistics were then generated from the quantitative data.

### ***2009 SitPF audience***

All people who attended SitPF in 2009 were invited to complete an onsite, closed-format questionnaire during the evening of their attendance. Responses to this closed-format questionnaire were to generate some basic demographic profiling and to highlight the audience's expectations of, and reactions to, SitPF that year. Ushers equipped with questionnaires and pens approached patrons at interval to undertake the research. No incentive was given to complete the questionnaire, but all were told that their feedback would assist organisers' future planning. This questionnaire also featured on the SitPF website for patrons who did not have the time or inclination to complete it on the night of their attendance. A total of 171 patrons (or 4 per cent of the total SitPF audience) completed the questionnaire, and statistics were then generated from the quantitative data obtained.

### ***Regular SitPF Patrons***

One hundred audience members who had attended three or more of the six SitPFs (including the 2009 festival) in Toowoomba were approached via direct mail to participate in one-hour long, post-SitPF focus groups, which were held in the two weeks following its conclusion in 2009. Their names and contact details were obtained through the ticketing agent database. The focus group inquiry sought to find out why the participants patronised SitPF on multiple occasions, their expectations and perceptions of SitPF, and whether they had any suggestions or recommendations for the future of SitPF. A memorabilia/merchandise pack was offered to each of the patrons as an incentive to participate. Light refreshments were provided during the focus group sessions. Two focus groups were audio-recorded and the data was later interpreted using content and thematic analyses. Twenty per cent of those contacted elected to take part in the facilitated focus groups. The ages of the respondents ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. Seventy per cent of the respondents were female, which reflected the fact that well over half of SitPF's audiences were women.

The focus group research method was chosen for the regular patrons due to its ability to generate extensive and detailed information about a group's attitudes and perceptions. It can be a successful method to generate hypotheses because it not only gathers participants' thoughts on a given subject but uncovers why they think they way they do (Morgan 1988). It was not known why these audience members returned to SitPF year after year, and since they had some investment in the event due to their regular patronage, it was thought most beneficial to bring them together (in small groups of eight to twelve people) to openly discuss their opinions of SitPF and their recommendations to further improve it. The questions asked by the facilitator sought information in keeping with common types of research conducted for the purposes of audience development (Kolb 2000).<sup>8</sup> These types or key topic areas of research provided a breadth of insight into the patrons' perceptions of SitPF as a whole.

## **Findings**

### ***Shakespeare a Deterrent to Non-SitPF Attenders***

The research found that a significant proportion of those who had never attended SitPF before exhibited a similar demographic profile to those who did primarily attend.<sup>9</sup> That is, 60 per cent of those who completed the questionnaire indicated that they held a professional occupation; 63 per cent were aged 31–50 years; and 57 per cent were female. This finding is important because it indicates that the interested non-attenders exhibit a similar profile to those who currently attend. It suggests that there are influencing factors missing within the non-attender group that prevent them attending SitPF, although demographically they are in keeping with current audiences.

Respondents were given a number of reasons to select from when indicating their reasons for non-attendance. They were able to choose as many of these responses as they deemed relevant. The questionnaire results indicated that the primary reason for non-attendance stemmed from concerns that respondents would not enjoy or understand the Shakespearean content (68 per cent of the sample). Thus Shakespeare's plays appeared to be the barrier preventing attendance. Further to this, it is likely respondents were expressing a 'fear of the unknown', which is typically the greatest deterrent to live theatre attendance for those who do not normally attend (Scollen 2009). As indicated below, this group rarely attends live theatre productions, and members are concerned that they will not understand Shakespeare; in combination, this can lead to the decision not to waste time or money on an activity they may not enjoy. When a person is concerned that they will not enjoy or understand an activity with which they are unfamiliar, the risks associated with wasting time and money on it are heightened (Scollen

2009). The risk of dissatisfaction can mean that ticket prices are deemed too high even if they are the same price as another activity that they regularly undertake (Scollen 2007a). Ticket price was a deterrent for 28 per cent of the sample. As expected from the above result, the majority of respondents (82 per cent) had not attended a Shakespearean production elsewhere during the last three years.

Although two-thirds of the respondents were concerned that they would not enjoy or understand the Shakespearean content featured at SitPF, the primary expectations about the event were positive. All respondents had the opportunity to select positive and negative expectations at this question; however, the most common responses were optimistic. SitPF was perceived to be entertaining (55 per cent of respondents), good quality (51 per cent), relaxed (39 per cent) and exciting (35 per cent). This finding appears to confirm that the overall festival is held in high regard, but fear of the Shakespearean content outweighs the inclination to attend.

Although not SitPF audiences, most of the respondents (88 per cent) had attended other arts and cultural events since 2006. Mainstream films, followed by music and visual arts, were the types of events in which they typically engaged. This finding shows the non-attenders' capacity to be audiences at other arts events. It is evident that they are not adverse to spending money and time on arts engagement. In fact, some of the events attended by 45 per cent of respondents in recent times were produced by USQ, so they were not necessarily dissuaded from the festival due to its university connections. Interestingly, over half the sample (58 per cent) stated that they had not attended other outdoor festivals in the last three years, which suggests that the park venue may not be an enticement for many of the respondents.

### ***Shakespeare: Incidental to 2009 SitPF Audiences***

As opposed to previous data-gathering that indicated the primary audience for SitPF was female, aged 31–50 years and professional, the results of the 2009 questionnaire suggested differently. According to the sample of respondents who elected to complete the questionnaire, only one-third of the audience held a professional occupation, but almost half (46 per cent) of the sample were either high school or tertiary students. As such, 62 per cent of the respondents were younger than 16 years through to 30 years of age. Sixty-four per cent were female, which was a similar result to previous research undertaken at SitPF. A little less than half the sample (45 per cent) resided beyond Toowoomba's boundaries, which was an increase of 10 per cent on previous years. This alteration of the demographic profile of the SitPF audience could suggest that the 2009 festival attracted fewer members of the general public than usual, which could account for the downturn in attendance figures. However, based on registered ticket sales, which showed an insubstantial fall in adult ticket purchases, it is more likely that the questionnaires were readily completed by the student audiences who frequented certain evenings during the season. The results below provide some indication of how SitPF was received in 2009, albeit by a younger demographic.

The majority (87 per cent) of those who completed the questionnaire indicated that they enjoyed the production of *The Tempest*. The set and costumes were the most popular reasons for enjoyment of the show, and the outdoor setting was also greatly enjoyed. These results were in keeping with the findings from the previous three festivals (with broader demographic representation). This appears to indicate that the spectacle of the production combined with the outdoor theatre environment were central to SitPF audience satisfaction. The Shakespearean content, and the storyline/themes/characters in the play, were not mentioned as primary factors contributing to enjoyment. However, the results show that the respondents enjoyed this Shakespearean play regardless.

Two-thirds of the sample were identified as a regular arts patrons, with 36 per cent attending a few times per year, 22 per cent attending once per month and 9 per cent attending on a weekly basis. A little over half (52 per cent) of the entire sample stated they had attended USQ arts events (other than SitPF) in recent years. Three-quarters of those who had attended USQ arts events had attended theatre productions. This result is in direct contrast to SitPF non-attenders, who appeared to engage mostly in visual art and music at USQ.

In keeping with the non-attender results presented earlier, many of the SitPF audience (68 per cent of the sample) did not attend other outdoor festivals in 2009. In fact, even fewer people from this group of respondents engaged in outdoor festivals than the SitPF non-attenders. This may be because there are no other live theatre festivals held in the region and the 2009 SitPF audience appears to prefer theatre to other art forms. It could be argued that the Shakespearean content of this outdoor festival draws them to this event over other outdoor festivals; however, only 29 per cent stated that they attended because of

this. One-third of the entire sample was encouraged to attend SitPF due to its outdoor setting, and once at the venue most of the respondents indicated the outdoor environment played a significant role in them enjoying the live theatre production.

It appears that while the non-attenders were prevented from engaging with SitPF because of its Shakespearean content, for those who did attend in 2009, this aspect of the event was almost incidental for two-thirds of those who completed the questionnaire. It appears that the combination of live theatre, with spectacular costumes and sets, situated in a park setting, drove their satisfaction levels for the festival. Thus SitPF may be making Shakespeare more accessible to the community by attracting their attendance, but it is possible that as many people would have attended the event if another playwright had been featured.

### **Shakespeare: Vehicle for Regular SitPF Patrons**

The focus group participants had all attended multiple SitPFs since 2004. Over half of the respondents (58 per cent) had attended all six SitPFs, while 20 per cent had attended four SitPFs in the past. The two most popular reasons for returning to SitPF were to support a local event and because they had enjoyed the SitPFs they had attended previously. In fact, the primary reasons the respondents had attended SitPF in the first place were to support a local initiative and because they had enjoyed another outdoor, off-campus theatre event produced by USQ some years prior. Only a third stated that they had attended because of their love of Shakespearean plays. These results appear to indicate that regular SitPF patrons are less concerned with Shakespeare than they are with actively supporting local cultural events. All respondents stated that they believed SitPF made a valuable contribution to culture in the community, and that it was important that it continue. This is in keeping with Gaby's assertion that: 'A significant part of the attraction of the Shakespeare Festival is the opportunity it provides to engage culturally with local space.' (2007: 175)

The location of SitPF at Queens Park was the central reason for enjoyment of the festival for this group of people (50 per cent of respondents). Some examples of typical comments made by focus group participants now follow.

*I think you just see Shakespeare and you think 'Wow I'm not going to miss this!' I just think 'Yeah, in the park, that's got to be so much better.' (Female, twenties)*

*It's the atmosphere. I just love being able to sit there casually, just tell people it doesn't matter if somebody's opening a packet of chips behind you. It's just yeah, the atmosphere. (Female, fifties)*

*So it was, yeah, venue, and the thought of going into the park and having it done in that sort of setting. I may not have gone if it was in the Performing Arts Centre. Not that there have been some awesome plays in the Centre and at The Empire, but just that extra – the venue sort of added to it as well ... (Male, forties)*

*But I think it is the fact that you can take everything – it's a big picnic and a big event, and it is nice to be outside at night and feel safe. (Female, thirties)*

The costumes (30 per cent), and the USQ student actors (25 per cent), were the other primary components of SitPF that the participants enjoyed. These results are similar to those for participants who attended the 2009 festival:

*I love the costuming. The costuming is usually beautiful. (Female, fifties)*

*And I think the acting is superb. I really do. I think they're tremendous, those young actors and actresses ... They're third and fourth year students and what they do just is amazing. (Female, thirties)*

Upon finding out the regular patrons' favourite past productions of SitPF (*Comedy of Errors*, 2006 and *Hamlet*, 2004), it was evident that two other key aspects led to their enjoyment of the plays: the audience and actor interaction; and references to the local (via relevant inserts within the texts). These aspects



correlate with their stated preference for SitPF because it is a local event that directly includes young local USQ theatre performers. The actor–audience interaction adds to the community-inclusive/patron-inclusive atmosphere of the festival, and can help audiences to stay engaged with the production. Thus Shakespeare appears to act as a vehicle for community engagement in local cultural initiative rather than being the primary driver for theatre attendance in the park.

The regular patrons also indicated three aspects that they felt could be improved to enhance their satisfaction with SitPF. To improve visibility, verbal clarity and seated comfort within the site, a range of suggestions were made concerning the layout of the outdoor auditorium, as well as the desire for raked seating or sloped ground. To improve the sense of security when leaving the site and crossing the large park on foot to reach vehicles, suggestions for enhanced park lighting were made. Thus suggestions for improvement were directly related to the outdoor theatre setting (rather than the Shakespearean content), which many had indicated was responsible for their overall enjoyment of the event.

### **2010 SitPF: Anomaly Provides Perspective**

As indicated earlier, ticket sales to *Twelfth Night* were at their highest two weeks prior to the production opening in 2010, compared with the same time for any of the previous festivals. This indicated that audience numbers would increase from 2009, and either meet *Romeo and Juliet* attendance or improve upon it. However, due to the weather conditions, the first week of the season was cancelled and the second week was shifted to the 1550-seat proscenium-arched Empire Theatre nearby. Over the four performances, this venue had the potential to house up to 6000 patrons, which was likely the most that would have been achieved that year in the park with good weather conditions.

At the four performances held in the theatre, the standard audience questionnaire was distributed and some unique results from this survey provided perspective to results of previous years. Unlike audience responses from 2006–09, the audiences at the 2010 production stated that the characters (72 per cent of respondents), costumes (66 per cent), actors (63 per cent) and set (57 per cent) were the primary aspects leading to their enjoyment of *Twelfth Night*. This was the first time that characters and actors were given such prominence in the results. This indicated the audience was more engaged with the play than in previous years. This could be because the production was held indoors, with patrons seated in rows facing the stage, not distracted by the casual BYO outdoor ambience and seating arrangements. It could also be because they may have been able to see and hear the production more clearly, and thus stay more focused on the content. However, it may also have been the result of an audience that had a strong interest in Shakespeare and in theatregoing. Almost half of the respondents (43.5 per cent) stated that they attended in 2010 due to the Shakespearean content and 30 per cent stated that they wished to experience live theatre. This indicates an audience with a stronger interest, and perhaps understanding, of Shakespeare's plays, which could enhance their capacity to engage with the drama.

Although the venue had the capacity to hold the entire anticipated 2010 SitPF audience, ticket sales were below 50 per cent. This result, combined with the finding that many of those who attended were seeking Shakespeare, suggests that the missing half of the audience elected to stay home since the event was not held outdoors in the park. This conclusion is further endorsed by the demographic profile of the respondents to the audience questionnaire. There was an increase in the number of older patrons (51 years and over, who were retired from their professions), who completed the questionnaire. The 31–50 years age group of working professionals was much reduced in representation compared with previous years. It seems that older patrons may have been attracted by the comfort and 'appropriateness' of an indoor theatre setting. Younger patrons may have been discouraged by the loss of casual atmosphere and the outdoors. The school audience attendance was at almost the same level as in previous years, which showed that the Shakespearean content was a driving factor for their patronage to SitPF, regardless of venue.

### **Conclusions**

The USQ Shakespeare in the Park Festival was established to make the works of Shakespeare accessible to the community of regional Queensland. Loyal returned patronage and a steady stream of new audiences each year have seen SitPF grow over the last seven years. Thousands of people of all ages attend the annual festival and enjoy the Shakespearean plays that are presented. Yet the audience research presented here indicates that the Shakespearean content of the festival is not a major factor contributing to the desire to attend. Nor are the Shakespearean plays' narratives, characters or themes central to patrons' enjoyment of the productions or of SitPF generally. The live productions of

Shakespeare's classics are satisfying to audiences, but chiefly due to the spectacle of the events and their location in an outdoor casual environment. In this sense, the 'Shakespeare' in the park seems diminished in importance in relation to the overall event.

However, there are many thousands of people living in the community who have not attended SitPF, and at least for those who completed the online questionnaire, the Shakespearean content is the primary deterrent to their attendance. To increase audience numbers for SitPF in the future, it appears additional methods are needed to make Shakespeare less intimidating and worth patrons risking their time and money. Taking into account the findings of this study, one could argue that incorporating some non-Shakespearean content into the festival and/or including mainstream films of Shakespearean plays could entice non-attenders to trial SitPF in future. Furthermore, a combination of indoor and outdoor events may appeal to those who do not normally attend outdoor festivals but would like to experience live theatre. If these experiences are positive, they may then feel inclined to attend a Shakespearean play at the following year's festival.

It is clear that the outdoor location of SitPF was a key attraction for those who attended in 2009 and in earlier years. Arguably, at least half of these patrons elected not to attend *Twelfth Night* in 2010 because it was performed in a traditional indoor theatre environment. This shows that SitPF has been successful in making Shakespeare accessible to the community by taking it outdoors. To further increase patronage, as shown by the results of this study, additional methods will be needed to entice older patrons who have an understanding and love of Shakespeare to the park. Alternatively, the proposed inclusion of some indoor festival activity, as well as outdoor activity, may cater to this group. To retain and grow audiences in the 31–50 years age bracket, it is vital to keep Shakespeare in the park. The next step will be to find a way to overcome some of the barriers posed by performing in the park, which potentially prevent audiences' greater levels of engagement with the Shakespearean plays in performance. If this is done, future audience research may begin to show patrons' increased response to the characters, actors and stories when determining their enjoyment.

The audience research presented here is limited. The sample is small, the audience reception inquiry has no real depth, and there is minimal attention to qualitative data-gathering. However, the results so far demonstrate the value of undertaking audience research to inform theatre practice and community engagement. Therefore, as part of the 2011 SitPF, a much larger audience project will occur, which will incorporate a wider range of data-gathering methods and a closer investigation of patrons' reception of the main-stage production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and of the festival overall.

## Notes

1. With a population of more than 90,000 people, Toowoomba is Australia's largest inland regional city and is the commercial and economic hub of the Darling Downs, thereby serving a population in excess of 250,000 people. The city is located in South-East Queensland, atop the Great Dividing Range and 130 kilometres west of the state's capital of Brisbane. Its major industries include manufacturing, wholesale, agriculture and education (it houses more than 23 private schools, three state schools, a technical college and a university).
2. In 2011, SitPF will present in Queens Park in October for the first time.
3. The plays performed at SitPF were: *Hamlet* (2004), *The Taming of the Shrew* (2005), *A Comedy of Errors* (2006), *Macbeth* (2007), *Romeo and Juliet* (2008), *The Tempest* (2009) and *Twelfth Night* (2010).
4. Scott Alderdice (USQ) 2004; Kate Foy (USQ) 2005; Scott Witt 2006; Scott Alderdice (USQ) 2007; Scott Alderdice (USQ) 2008; Andrea Moor 2009; and Lewis Jones 2010.
5. In this context, live theatre does not include musicals.
6. Toowoomba – along with the Darling Downs region generally – does not have a professional theatre company in residence. Instead, live theatre experiences are produced by USQ Artsworx, the Toowoomba Repertory Theatre and the local government-owned Empire Theatre. USQ's theatre productions (besides SitPF) are presented in the USQ Arts Theatre (257 seats). On average, popular classics are patronised by 1750 people over nine performances; less well-known dramas attract 600 people across a season of six shows, and children's plays entice up to

2500 audience members over fifteen performances. The Repertory Theatre presents an annual season of plays in its 100-seat venue. Each production consists of twelve performances presented to an average of 90 audience members (or 1080 people per production). The Empire Theatre seats 1550 patrons in its venue. Plays presented will typically attract anywhere between 50 and 1000 patrons: experimental works normally perform to a paying audience on one occasion and attract 50 to 100 patrons; in-house productions usually perform three times with an average of 300 patrons per show (900 in total); while well-known, mainstream touring productions will normally present for one or two nights only and attract around 900 to 1000 patrons in total.

7. The reasons are as follows:
  - a. To provide an annual cultural event, based on performance, and inspired by the works of William Shakespeare, which has a wide audience appeal and which provides high-quality entertainment and a range of educational activities in a comfortable, relaxed setting.
  - b. To provide festival visitors with an affordable, cultural, recreational activity with appeal to a diverse audience.
  - c. To provide USQ students and staff with opportunities to engage in project-based service learning and research activities.
  - d. To provide for children and school students of all ages and abilities an event that engages them in a range of exciting and stimulating activities aimed at making the plays of Shakespeare and the arts of the theatre more accessible.
  - e. To provide Toowoomba with a community cultural event that encourages local artists, supports local business through tourism and will increase Toowoomba's profile as a leading provider of creative arts and cultural activity.
8. The reasons are as follows:
  - a. Audience research – nature, composition and preferences of current and potential audiences
  - b. Motivation research – reasons for attendance
  - c. Customer satisfaction – extent to which event meets audiences' expectations
  - d. Pricing research – formulation of pricing policies
  - e. Product research – improvement of product and facilities
  - f. Competitor research – audience perceptions in comparison with other venues
  - g. Policy research – national attitudes towards the arts
  - h. Promotional research – effectiveness of different media, messages and promotions in communicating
  - i. Demographic profile of patrons based on audience research, 2006–08.

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