

## Article 1

### BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: REGIONAL PERFORMING ARTS CENTRES AND NON-THEATREGOERS INTRODUCED

By Rebecca Scollen (Australia)

#### Abstract

The *Talking Theatre* project (2004–06) was an audience development initiative implemented in regional Queensland and 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. 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. A series of questionnaires and post-performance discussion groups generated extensive quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to non-theatre-goers and their reception of theatre-going. Findings indicated that key deterrents to attendance (ticket price, parenting responsibilities, low-quality performances and work commitments) were outcomes of a larger barrier to theatre-going: fear of the unknown. Participation in the research resulted in return patronage of participants and their families/friends, confirming that social interaction and peer recommendations are vital to becoming a theatre-goer.

#### Résumé

Le projet *Talking Theatre* (*Théâtre parlé*) (2004-06) était une initiative de développement d'audience mis en place dans les régions du Queensland et du Territoire du Nord en Australie. Le projet cherchait à aider les centres d'art du spectacle à mieux s'engager auprès de leurs communautés locales et à construire de nouvelles audiences pour le futur. La recherche avait pour but de comprendre les « non-habitués » du théâtre : leurs raisons de ne pas venir, leurs perspectives vis-à-vis de la culture des habitués du théâtre, et leurs réactions face à divers spectacles en public auxquelles ils ont participé dans des conditions d'études. Une série de questionnaires et de groupes de discussion après le spectacle a produit de nombreuses informations quantitatives et qualitatives concernant les « non-habitués » du théâtre et leurs impressions d'assister à une pièce de théâtre. Leurs trouvailles indiquent que les principaux obstacles à l'assistance (prix du billet, responsabilités parentales, spectacles de mauvaise qualité et obligations d'emploi) étaient le résultat d'une barrière plus importante à l'assistance à un spectacle théâtral : la peur de l'inconnu. La participation à la recherche a eu pour résultat un retour au théâtre par les participants et leurs famille/amis, confirmant que l'interaction sociale et les recommandations par l'entourage sont vitales pour devenir un spectateur.

#### Resumen

El Proyecto *Teatro Hablado* (2004-06) fue una iniciativa desarrollada por el público e implementada en las regiones de Queensland y el Territorio Norte de Australia. El proyecto pretendía ayudar a los centros de artes interpretativas mejorar la relación de ellos con sus comunidades locales y formar nuevas audiencias para el futuro. La investigación tenía el objetivo de entender a las personas que no iban al teatro, las razones de porqué no se hacían presentes al teatro, sus perspectivas en cuanto a la cultura de ir al teatro y las reacciones que tenían ante una serie de obras en vivo sometidas a condiciones de estudio. Una serie de cuestionarios y discusiones grupales luego de las presentaciones de las obras, generó datos cuantitativos y cualitativos en cuanto a las personas que no asisten al teatro y su receptividad sobre su asistencia al teatro. Los hallazgos indicaron que los impedimentos claves para no

atender (precio de los boletos, responsabilidades de los padres de familia, obras de baja calidad y compromisos de trabajo) comprendían elementos de mayor barrera para asistir al teatro, tales como: temor a lo desconocido. La participación en la investigación dio como resultado un regreso de los participantes al teatro, así como la de sus familias/amistades. Confirmando el hecho, de que la interacción social y las recomendaciones de sus semejantes son vitales para convertirse en una persona que asiste al teatro.

### **Author's Biography**

Dr Rebecca Scollen manages Artsworx in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba. Prior to this, Rebecca completed a three-year Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship where she was primary researcher and trainer for the Talking Theatre project. Before taking on this role, Rebecca taught in the Creative Industries Faculty at the Queensland University of Technology. She also ran a successful audience research, reception and development consultancy.

### **Biographie de l'auteur**

Dr Rebecca Scollen gère Artsworx à la Faculté des Arts de la, à Toowoomba. Auparavant, Rebecca a achevé un programme postdoctoral australien sur trois ans, où elle était le chercheur principal et la formatrice pour le projet Talking Theatre. Avant d'occuper ce rôle, Rebecca a enseigné dans la Faculté des industries créatives à la Queensland University of Technology. Elle gérait également avec succès un cabinet de recherche, de réception et de développement d'audience.

### **Biografía de la autora**

La Dra Rebecca Scollen está a cargo de Artsworx en la Facultad de Artes de la Universidad del Sur de Queensland, Toowoomba. Previo a esto, Rebecca completó un Fellowship Postdoctoral Australiano de tres años, durante la cual ella se desempeñaba como investigadora principal y capacitadora para el proyecto del Teatro Hablado. Antes de asumir este cargo, Rebecca fue catedrática de la Facultad de las Industrias Creativas de la Universidad Tecnológica de Queensland. Asimismo, ella también tenía una consultoría exitosa sobre investigación de audiencias, recepción y desarrollo.

## BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: REGIONAL PERFORMING ARTS CENTRES AND NON-THEATREGOERS INTRODUCED

### Introduction

Theatre is commonly understood to play a significant role in the presentation and development of cultures. However, what if some individuals 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 world-views? Or is there simply a breakdown in communication between theatre and non-theatregoers, which prevents both entities from successfully engaging?

For many people in Australian society, theatregoing is not an activity they wish to pursue. It would seem that the cultures represented, examined and challenged by theatre are not perceived to be their own. Even Turner (in Schechner and 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 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' (Schwartz, 1997: 166–67) or, in other words, those who have the 'interpretative, intellectual and aesthetic skills' (Bennett et al., 1999: 230) available to a selected minority via the education system and the family. International research has certainly shown that the greater one's education, the more likely one is to attend the arts (McCarthy et al., 2004; Australia Council, 2000; Kotler and Scheff, 1997). In Australia, it is estimated that tertiary-educated citizens are 194 per cent more likely to participate in the arts than those with primary schooling (Bennett, 1999: 232). Interestingly, a 1985 study (Kotler and Scheff, 1997) in Cleveland, Ohio in the United States 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 were educated in 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. It seems Bourdieu's (1986) claim that family is also important in the creation of taste and automatic entry to restricted culture could be argued to still hold true today — albeit interpreted a little more widely than he had in mind.

As family and peers are closest to us, they are likely to have the most impact on our actions and perceptions. Roberts argues (1972 in Bennett et al., 1981: 277) that '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, 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, it could be argued that social interaction and familial/peer influence may be more integral than wealth and education as factors leading to theatre attendance and cultural engagement.

### The *Talking Theatre* project as conduit

#### **Research partners, goals and design**

*Talking Theatre: An Audience Development Programme for Regional Queensland and the Northern Territory* (2004–06) was a three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council, Northern Australian Regional Performing Arts Centres Association (NARPACA), 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 research design sought to enable non-theatre-goers living in regional Queensland and the Northern Territory to directly experience three live performances in a theatre setting. It also provided the context for the non-theatre-goers to interact with other non-theatre-goers participating in the research, as they attended the theatres together and discussed their reception together after each performance. One of the central beliefs of the research design was that the combination of direct experience with theatrical performances and participation in post-performance discussions with peers would grow non-theatre-goers' awareness of, interest in and confidence to engage with theatre in the future. The opportunity to personally engage with theatrical performances would enable the creation of meaning for each individual. For the participants to then immediately share their perspectives with others (who were perceived to be similar to themselves as they all identified as non-theatre-goers) would help to confirm their ideas or to add to them. Times for self-reflection and consideration of reactions by peers would lead to further thought about live performance and attendance, and thus increase the likelihood of future theatre-going.

The research design also enabled the participants to air their views, knowing that their feedback would be given to the staff at the PACs to consider and to potentially provide learning. It was believed that this would assist the non-theatre-goers to feel valued by the PACs and concurrently help the PACs to be in a stronger position to make effective decisions to positively impact on other interested non-theatre-goers in their communities. Information gathered from the participants would provide insight into non-attenders' attitudes toward programming, pricing, facilities and promotion. A professional development component of the *Talking Theatre* project also 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.

### **Methodology**

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 PACs who were members of NARPACA (Araluen Centre in Alice Springs, Darwin Entertainment Centre, Cairns Civic Theatre, Mackay Entertainment Centre, Townsville Civic Theatre, Burdekin Theatre in Ayr, World Theatre in Charters Towers, Mount Isa Civic Centre, Pilbeam Theatre in Rockhampton, Nambour Civic Centre, Caloundra Cultural Centre, the Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Ipswich Civic Hall and Logan Entertainment Centre south of Brisbane) opened their doors to welcome those who had volunteered to participate in the study. 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 that: 'The future of the arts depends on finding new supporters/markets outside of current traditional support, e.g. 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 areas. 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.

Non-theatre-goers from each of the fourteen regions were recruited for the research via media coverage about 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 per cent), aged 30–49 years (55 per cent), tertiary educated (51 per cent), and earning A\$20,000–\$50,000 per annum (45 per cent). The sample also consisted mostly of active leisure-seekers who regularly spent time and money on dining out at restaurants (76 per cent), going to the cinema (68 per cent), engaging in family gatherings (61 per cent), and exploring arts and crafts markets (57 per cent).

Twenty-four participants in each region were sought to attend three live performances (free of charge) at their PAC. Each performance would be significantly different in genre (for example, a play, a ballet and an

opera). Immediately following each of the three performances, they were asked to complete a post-performance questionnaire to generate quantitative data concerning: their expectations and levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the performance; the elements of performance that ensured their enjoyment and understanding; the underlying messages in the performance; and anyone or anything in the performance to which they could relate. The participants answered the questions without consultation and completed the task in five minutes. The data was later collated and analysed using SPSS software. The statistics drawn from this data could then be compared with and placed alongside the findings of the focus group discussions.

After the participants completed the post-performance questionnaire, 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. The facilitator began the discussion by establishing the purpose of the focus groups, which was to share with each other any particular aspects of the performance or theatre outing that the participants enjoyed, disliked, could not understand, or found significant or surprising. Essentially, the discussion was framed as a dedicated occasion for participants to reflect on their time at the theatre and to discuss any aspects of interest with their peers. The facilitator then 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 theatregoing which was important to new audiences. The data were later transcribed and interpreted using content analysis and thematic analysis.

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-theatregoers. 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. Content analysis enabled this data to be interpreted and then combined with the findings of post-performance questionnaires and discussions to provide the PACs (and the other stakeholders in the research) with an understanding of a regional non-theatregoer profile and of non-theatregoers' reception of live performance and of the venues presenting them.

## **Findings**

### *Profile of a Non-theatregoer Living in Regional Queensland or in the Northern Territory*

As indicated earlier, the *Talking Theatre* sample included a diverse collection of people. Overall, the study primarily attracted women, 30–49-year-olds (of either sex), white-collar professionals and stay-at-home mothers, annual average income earners (\$20,000–\$50,000), active leisure-seekers, social beings (regularly spending time with family and friends) and people who enjoyed engaging with fiction (regularly reading and watching television/film).

Interestingly, a significant number of those involved in the research were middle-aged (40 per cent of the total sample), tertiary educated (46 per cent of the total sample) and medium (38 per cent of the total sample) to high income earners (14.5 per cent of the total sample). This finding supported but also refuted the common perception that theatregoing 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 theatregoers. 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 theatregoers highlighted that education and income do not automatically ensure appreciation and participation in the arts, nor elitism.

The non-theatregoers (regardless of education and wealth) in the project had one key factor in common: they did not socialise with peers or family who attended theatre and they were not encouraged by them to do so. Even 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 and absence of peer recommendation or introduction stifled their attendance as adults.

### *Primary Reasons for Non-attendance*

Ticket price was cited in the responses to the pre-performance questionnaire as the most popular reason for non-attendance (50 per cent of the total sample). Sixty per cent of those who stated that ticket prices were prohibitive were earning annual incomes in the range from below \$10,000 to \$35,000. Parenting responsibilities, the perceived low quality of the performances and work commitments were the other popular reasons for non-attendance. Those earning higher incomes (over \$60,000 per year) tended to cite work commitments and parenting responsibilities as deterrents to attendance. Yet the participants in the study (regardless of income) were active leisure-seekers and did spend time and money on other activities such as dining out, going to the cinema, engaging in family gatherings, and visiting arts and crafts markets.

Conversation at the first post-performance group discussions typically included participants' reasons for non-attendance. Here it was found that a larger barrier prevented their engagement with theatre. This barrier was the fear of the unknown, and the subsequent concern was that the experience may be a waste of time and money. The above deterrents to attendance were listed by the participants in the questionnaire. The non-theatre-goers mentioned that their lack of awareness of what would be involved in theatre-going, their limited understanding of what the performances would entail, as well as the absence of friends or family interested in coming with them, made the notion of theatre attendance too daunting. Therefore, the risks associated with attendance ensured that the experience seemed either too expensive or too time-consuming.

Results of the pre-performance questionnaire also indicated that almost three-quarters of the total sample (72 per cent) were attracted to the *Talking Theatre* project because it provided opportunities to attend performances that they would not normally see. Sixty-seven per cent of the sample saw the study as a chance to obtain free tickets and to take part in an interesting project. The questionnaire results also showed that the most common anticipated gains for the participants in the study were enjoyment, a better appreciation and understanding of live performance and of the PAC, and exposure to performances they would not normally attend. The most popular expectation of the non-theatre-goers' role in the study was to provide feedback about the performances and the PACs.

### *Primary Reactions to Live Performance*

The participants experienced three performances of different types to enable the PACs to demonstrate on a small scale the scope of their annual seasons. The diversity and the repetition of attendance also allowed the non-theatre-goers to assess the kinds of performance that appealed to them. The performance genres across the fourteen PACs consisted of plays, ballet, opera, stand-up comedy, contemporary dance, musicals, classical music and other instrumental music concerts. Prior to attendance, the pre-performance questionnaire findings illustrated that the majority of the total sample believed they had a preference for comedy (85 per cent) and for popular/rock concerts (72 per cent). Over 60 per cent of the sample thought they would prefer drama (62 per cent), while 58 per cent stated a preference for stand-up comedy and 51 per cent indicated that they preferred musicals (please note that participants could indicate more than one style of performance when answering this question).

Prior to the *Talking Theatre* project, the non-theatre-goers had been wary about whether they would enjoy or understand theatrical performances:

*Before the Talking Theatre program, I thought that theatre was boring, even though I had never been before. (Talking Theatre participant)*

Yet the research found that all three performances in each of the PACs were enjoyed and understood by the majority of the participants. The average rating of enjoyment across the entire sample and across all performances was 7 out of 10. The average rating of understanding across the entire sample and across all performances was 7.5 out of 10. The performers best assisted most participants to enjoy and comprehend the performances. The non-theatre-goers in the study were particularly impressed by the performers' skill, and found them engaging because they were performing in real time, in real life and in close proximity to the audience:

*I really admire the performers. They are very clever, especially by the way they keep an audience enthralled. Live performances have atmosphere and are magical. (Talking Theatre participant)*



The humour and the sound/music were also key elements in producing enjoyment and comprehension for many of the participants. These factors were in keeping with their preferences for comedies, pop/rock concerts and musicals.

#### *Recognition of Cultures and Ability to Relate to Performance and Those in Attendance*

In the post-performance group discussions, the non-theatre-goers raised a variety of topics which could loosely be identified as either positive or negative comments about the performances, other key aspects discussed in relation to the performances (for example, themes, specific moments not understood, expectations) or attitude/behaviour/knowledge development of participants. Of interest to this paper was the finding that many participants could personally relate to, and recognise from life, situations and characters in the performances. Discussion concerning this topic was a regular feature in the focus groups, and the ability to relate to aspects in the performances increased participant enjoyment:

*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)*

Another result, derived from responses to the post-performance questionnaires, demonstrated that 56 per cent of the total sample could relate to someone or something in the performances — in most cases, it was the characters and the relationships between the characters. These findings indicated that the cultures represented on stage were not that different to the cultures of a significant number of the non-theatre-goers. Of note, however, is the 35 per cent of the sample who enjoyed and understood the performances could not relate to them. In these cases, it seemed that theatre did not represent their culture but still delivered an entertaining outcome.

Many of the non-theatre-goers had expressed concern prior to attending that they would not enjoy or understand the performances because they would not be able to relate to anything in the performances or 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 one participant said: 'I always thought (Theatre) was for cigar smoking old people.' (*Talking Theatre* participant comment) However, comments about the similarity of the paying audience members to themselves were 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 them. 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 the performances could be relevant to their lives, and that they could fit in with the theatre-going crowd.

#### *Impact of Social Interaction and Peers*

The pleasure of discovering that audience members were similar to themselves was further enhanced by the non-theatre-goers' enjoyment of spending time with each other during the project. Apart from the observation that the participants were comfortable and relaxed with each other over the duration of three theatre visits, the results of the final questionnaire, completed at home a few weeks after the last arranged theatre visit, illustrated the importance of peer interaction.

The following statistics were derived from 57 per cent of the total 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' perceptions about theatre-going and about specific performances.

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 per cent of the respondents stated they had a greater understanding of the performances after taking part in the post-performance group discussions. Sixty-six per cent 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 it provided the opportunity for the participants to listen to others' ideas (78.5 per cent), to have their own thoughts and feelings valued (62.5 per cent), to have the space and time to think more about the performances (60.5 per cent) and to get to know other people (60 per cent). In fact, many of the participants stated that they enjoyed the post-performance discussions as much, if not more, than the performances they were to talk about. Three quotes now follow as examples of the comments made by participants in the study:

*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.*

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

*I LOVED attending these shows and especially enjoyed the focus groups — people made certain comments that I hadn't picked up on myself.*

Further to this peer influence and interaction came the finding that 29 per cent of all participants returned on average more than once to their PAC after completing the study. Factoring in the paying guests they brought with them (other non-theatre-goers who were not in the study) resulted in a ticket multiplier of 397 per cent (or a ratio of 3.97 to 1). The non-theatre-goers had not only become new paying audiences but were actively recommending theatre attendance to their family and friends, and seeking their company at live performances. It appeared that many in their social networks were encouraged by the peer recommendation and the personal invitation to engage in the act of theatre-going:

*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. (Talking Theatre participant)*

*Thank you for involving us. I finally want to say that I hope they start bringing family tickets in as I am keen to bring my older kids and show them how good live shows are. (Talking Theatre participant)*

#### *Communication Breakdown Between Theatre and the Non-theatre-going Community*

The results of the *Talking Theatre* project indicated that, once non-theatre-goers had directly experienced theatre for themselves and shared their reception of the event with peers, the majority of them could confidently express their enjoyment and comprehension of live performance and the act of theatre-going. It was found that most of the non-theatre-goers participating in the research could relate to at least one of the performances, and could personally identify with something or someone in them. The participants also felt comfortable at the PACs because they were casual and social environments filled with audience members who seemed similar in age and dress to the non-theatre-goers.

These findings, amongst others, appear to indicate that for many the decision to not attend live performance is due to a lack of awareness stemming from a communication breakdown between the non-engaged and the theatre industry. In turn, this lack of awareness, combined with a lack of peer recommendation, leads to a variety of perceived risks deterring attendance. The results of the *Talking Theatre* project do not suggest that theatre simply resonates with particular cultures or groups of people by only expressing a narrow world-view. Instead, the results demonstrated that non-theatre-goers (of various income and education levels) were more than capable of enjoying and understanding live performances, and of engaging with the content and concepts portrayed.

These results indicated to non-theatre-goers that it was likely they would enjoy and understand performances if they elected to purchase tickets in the future. It was very possible that they would see their cultures represented on stage and surrounding them in the auditorium. The findings of the final



feedback questionnaire supported this assertion, as 86.5 per cent 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 per cent taking part in the *Talking Theatre* project. Not only were 93 per cent of the respondents more interested in live performances since taking part in *Talking Theatre*, but 31.5 per cent paid to attend a performance at their local PAC *during* their involvement in the project.

For the PACs, the results indicated 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 did not need 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 communicated their season and their PAC required review and alteration. Regular discussion by the participants in the focus groups provided a wealth of suggestions to the PACs to assist in bridging the divide between non-theatre-goers and the theatre industry. The participants explained that non-theatre-goers required more information about and insight into upcoming performances, and how they might be able to relate to them. In particular, they wished to know the storyline, the central issues, the aspects to which they may be able to relate, details about the genre, the performance's similarity to other popular art forms, how the performances might make them feel, any performers they may recognise, and the ticket prices. Each point builds expectation and understanding of the performance to assist them in their decision-making. As two participants 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 (so don't go to any).*

*Basically I had no idea what to expect. You can tell how oblivious I am to ballet. I actually thought it was like a musical where they come out and they kind of perform a bit of storyline and then break off into some dance and then come back into the storyline. So the whole vocabulary was a big shock for me, especially going from our last performance where it was all based on words to absolutely nothing.*

The non-theatre-goers were also pleasantly surprised with what the PACs had on offer, apart from the performances themselves (for example, bars, cafes and dining, outdoor areas, a wide range of patrons, friendly staff and a social atmosphere). They stated that these aspects needed to be actively promoted to inform the community of their existence because they were an important part of the outing and integral to social interaction with family and friends.

## **Conclusion**

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.

The study also showed the power of social interaction and of personal recommendation upon theatre attendance. The post-performance discussion groups played an integral role in building participants' knowledge of, and confidence in, theatre-going. They also provided a fun, relaxed social atmosphere sought by the non-theatre-goers in their usual leisure time. Beyond the discussion groups, the participants were talking with their peers about the performances they were attending in the *Talking Theatre* project. They also began recommending performances and encouraging family and friends to attend. Thus the barriers to attendance were lessened during the project and the potential for their future theatre-going greatly increased:

*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. (Talking Theatre participant)*

*Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appreciate live theatre. It will now play an important choice in my entertainment spending. (Talking Theatre participant)*

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