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CONSTRUCTING MEANING: AN AUDIENCE INTERPRETS WESTERN CANADA THEATRE

In order to represent the world in all its complexity, the artist must bring forth new forms and ideas, and trust in the intelligence of the spectator.

Robert Lepage

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Much like the Philosophy 101 question of whether a tree falling in the forest makes a noise without anyone being there to hear it, a discussion of theatre engenders a discussion of audience. As the noted theatre practitioner Jerzy Grotowski sees it, however, the audience question is more easily answered in a performance venue than in a forest: “Can theatre exist without an audience? At least one spectator is needed to make it a performance” (32). Indeed, it is a truism in the performative discipline that audience is vital. Susan Bennett, in her groundbreaking work *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, encapsulates this thought nicely: “Theatre is an obviously social phenomenon. It is an event which relies on the physical presence of an audience to confirm its cultural status” (86).

In fact, Bennett suggests – much like proponents of the position that the tree makes no sound without an audience – that the audience invests a play with meaning: “A performance can activate a diversity of responses, but it is the audience which finally ascribes meaning and usefulness to any cultural product” (156). Perhaps Bennett’s fellow scholar of Canadian theatre, Ric Knowles, summarizing the studies of audience response carried out by a variety of academics in the 1970’s and 1980’s, voices this idea even more forcefully: “The shared assumption underlying all of this work is that cultural productions neither *contain* meaning nor uni-dimensionally shape behaviour and belief; rather they *produce* meaning through the discursive work of an interpretative community and through the lived, everyday relationships of people with texts and performances” (17). In many senses, then, theatre audiences, individually and collectively, create, or at least co-create, the play they are seeing through their interpretations and discussions of it.

This article considers the lived, everyday relationships of a particular segment of an audience, not with a particular dramatic production such as a play, but with a larger performance – the performance of a theatre company. The Western Canada Theatre, like all theatre companies, depends for meaning on how its audience interprets it – on how its productions – its performances of itself – are received. “It’s Your Cue: The Audience Show” is our foray into the meaning of the company through the eyes of its spectators. In light of the above discussion, we might do better to refer to these spectators as participants, given their active role in creating the meaning of their local professional theatre company and their enthusiastic involvement in our study.

Two small groups – the “Shoot” participants who were photographed for our catalogue and art exhibition, and the “phone” group, who volunteered to be surveyed by telephone – completed a two-part survey, the first component requesting that they respond to ten statements on a scale of one to five and the second asking them to complete six statements. Here is the survey, reproduced for your examination:

Part One:

Please write the number that best describes your response beside each of the following ten questions.

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neither Disagree nor Agree (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

1. WCT is primarily an entertainment organization.
2. WCT is an important part of my living in Kamloops.
3. WCT audiences represent a wide diversity of the people of the community.
4. WCT’s choice of plays is generally engaging and relevant to my life.
5. WCT should choose more plays that tell stories about our community.
6. WCT plays an important cultural role in the city of Kamloops and area.
7. WCT plays an important social role in the city of Kamloops and area.
8. WCT addresses important community needs and issues.
9. WCT should address important community needs and issues.
10. WCT can have a key role in shaping the direction of Kamloops.

Part Two

Please respond by completing the following:

1. The present role of WCT in Kamloops is _____
2. The most important thing WCT does is _____
3. What WCT could do better is _____
4. If I could change one thing in WCT it would be _____
5. The impact on me of a typical WCT show is _____
6. The overall impact of WCT on this community is _____

For the purposes of this article, I have divided the responses to Part One into three categories: those which address participants’ perspectives on the overall nature and impact of the Western Canada Theatre on the individual and the city and region, those which analyze the nature of the company’s audience, and those which apply more specifically to play production. The comments from Part B of the survey will be addressed either in the section to which they apply or in a summary section; that is, this article synthesizes the two parts of the survey.

THE IMPACT OF THE COMPANY

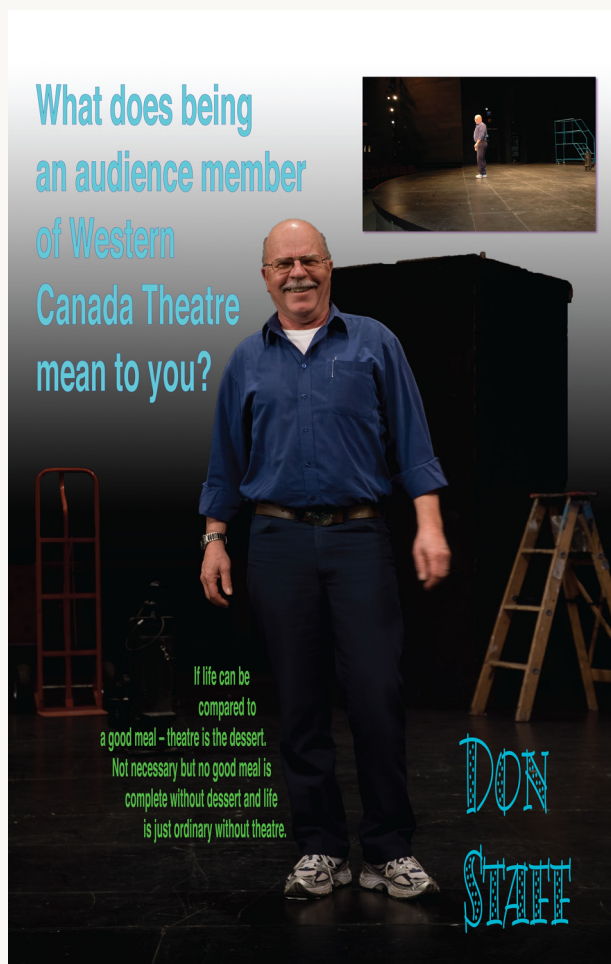
The strongest consensus emerged in response to the questions which assess the nature and impact of the company on the individual and the city and area. Participants also assigned the most positive rankings to questions in this category, especially questions one, two, and, above all, seven. Respondents largely concur that the Western Canada Theatre is primarily an entertainment venue that is an important component of their lives in Kamloops and that it has a significant social and cultural role in the city and area. In each case, over three-quarters of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with statements 1, 2, 6, and 7. Response to question 6, which addresses the cultural role of the company, was especially positive: 97.5 of the participants agreed or strongly agreed. Respondents clearly perceive and value Kamloops’s

professional theatre company for its social benefits and, even more resoundingly, as a source of cultural entertainment.

The anecdotal responses to perceived social benefits reinforce participants' responses to Question 7, as well as the findings of a report entitled *The Diversity of Cultural Participation*, a nation-wide study conducted in the US in 2004 that, of the seven major reasons attendees in that country gave for going to theatre, the most frequent response was socializing (followed by emotionally rewarding). Susan Bennett asserts, "The traditional evening performance is in many ways a central aspect of the mainstream theatrical event.... It...allows and encourages the arrangement of pre-and post theatre eating" (120-1). In fact, although no respondents mentioned eating specifically, several respondents used the term "night out" or "evening out with friends." More frequently, the importance of post-play discussion was emphasized; clearly, respondents perceive and appreciate the value of theatre in generating discussion among friends and fellow theatre goers. In fact, one participant acknowledges finding the social response to the play of more interest than the play itself, stating, "The overall impact on me of a typical WCT play is less about the play itself and more about how it fits into the community: how it was received, and what people's reactions are to it in the lobby afterwards." Participants' suggestions on how the company itself can enhance the social aspect will be discussed later in this article.

Several respondents used the word "culture" or synonyms in their replies to Part B of the survey and linked the theatre to the larger arts scene. Typical comments included, "I think it is a vital part of the fine arts in the community" and "The overall impact of WCT on this community is cultural development." At least one respondent perceived the cultural relationship as two-way, rather than uni-dimensional, stating, "We get an inkling of the larger cultural picture, but we also get a chance to influence it", which also hints at something that emerged more fully in several other responses: many of the participants place themselves in a small city context that they perceive as somewhat isolated and not particularly associated with arts culture, and see the company as providing them with a window into the larger provincial, national, or even international cultural scene.

A substantial number of respondents pointed to WCT as offering them performance opportunities they would only otherwise receive by travelling to Vancouver, more "cosmopolitan experiences," and some mentioned "the greater world of live theatre." One respondent took a historical perspective, asserting that WCT had an instrumental role in transforming the city from "a barren waste ground" over thirty years ago to a city that is "on the map culturally and artistically around British Columbia." The perception of Kamloops as a small city with a pre-dominantly non-artistic cultural focus, and of WCT as an antidote to that situation, was perhaps most succinctly put by the participant who wrote, "Kamloops has a reputation as a cow town, and we may be one. But we're a cow town with culture."



Given that participants were generally in agreement that the company's influence on themselves individually, their audience, and the surrounding community, was significant, I found the somewhat muted agreement to the final statement in Part A of the survey somewhat puzzling. While a slim majority – 55.8% – agreed that the company can have a key role in shaping the direction of Kamloops, the rest were split equally between the neutral category (neither disagreeing nor agreeing) and disagreeing. It would be impetuous to draw a definite conclusion from this somewhat more divided opinion, but one could speculate that, depending on how the participants interpreted the question, they view the term “social role” exclusively in the context of providing social interaction, they may perceive the company's social and cultural influence as stronger than their political influence, they are somewhat more hesitant to predict the future than assess the past and present, or they perceive the company as influential rather than powerful; that is, that cultural and social influence doesn't necessarily translate into political control.

THE NATURE OF THE AUDIENCE

Statement three—Western Canada Theatre audiences represent a wide diversity of the people in the community – is in a category by itself for the simple reason that it did not seem to fit into either of the above categories. The majority agreed with this statement, but it is worth noting that anecdotal suggestions were thought-provoking in this category. Several respondents indicated that the company needed to attract a wider demographic of the local population, although more responses focussed on enhancing the engagement of their existing audience. Engagement “with more diverse aspects of the community,” such as “native bands, gays, and the elderly” was recommended, as were attempts to draw more working and lower middle-class community members. In addition, some participants advocated for literally bringing the theatre into the community through travelling productions in the Thompson region (specifically, to schools) and adding outdoor summer productions. One thinks of the local company Project X, which stages productions in Prince Charles Park and other non-traditional theatre venues such as the Old Courthouse, as well as the 2007 production by Vancouver's Headlines Theatre of *METH* (which Western Canada Theatre brought to the Pavilion Theatre) as providing local examples of ways to engage segments of the community typically marginalized in mainstream theatre. Anecdotal responses suggest that the participants are aware of and interested in alternative ways, including outreach programs, to engage a wider demographic of the community.

THE IMPACT OF THE PLAYS

The waters become somewhat muddier as we examine the questions applicable to play selection. Question Four seems the most personal of the questions, as it asks participants to assess the impact of the company's play choices on them as individuals. Questions Five, Eight, and Nine asks respondents to proffer opinions on the company's relationship to its community.

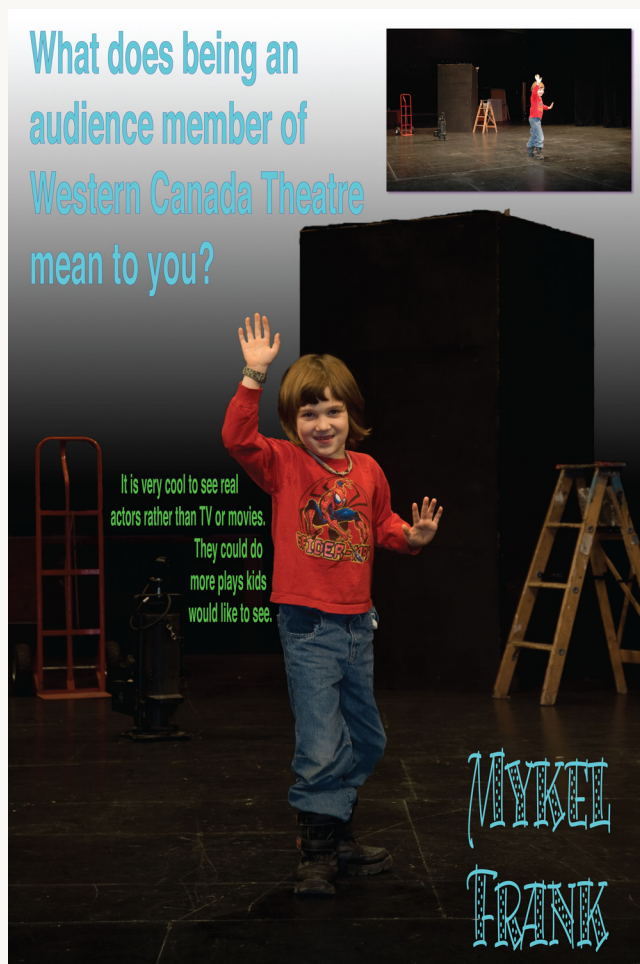
While a healthy number – approximately 46% – responded affirmatively to Question Four– they do see the plays selected as engaging to themselves personally, a substantial percentage – almost 35% – placed the plays squarely in the middle on this question. Apparently, many of the same people who place importance on the theatre company as a whole and see it as an important part of the social and cultural scene in the city are less enamoured of its particular production selections. That an additional 18% disagree with the statement in Question Four further reinforces this conclusion.

In reply to a question about what types of plays the company should be staging, specifically whether

they should opt for more plays that tell stories about their community, the cumulative responses were at considerable variance. Almost 48% neither agreed nor disagreed, and those in the other two categories were almost evenly split. In other words, only about one quarter agreed that the company should narrate its community, almost half were non committal, and only about one quarter believed the theatre company had the obligation to produce plays with local inflection. In responses to Part B of the survey, a similar indistinctness is revealed: although participants responded frequently with suggestions of what the company should produce, there is nothing approaching a consensus in terms of what they are looking for. Perhaps, as I will discuss in the next section of this article, what is worth noting is the eagerness of the participants to provide suggestions.

I will address the responses to Questions 8 and 9 jointly because I see them as closely linked – interdependent, in fact. To the question of whether the Western Canada Theatre addresses important community needs and issues, nineteen answered in the affirmative, sixteen were in the middle, and eight disagreed. Depending on how we interpret these numbers, we may perceive of only a small percentage (18.6%) not agreeing that the company links to its community in this direct way, or we may read the majority (over 55.8%) as not perceiving a strong link. However, assessing these responses in tandem with the responses to Question 9, the Western Canada Theatre *should* (italics mine) address important community needs and issues, offers another layer of complexity: approximately 53% believed the community should play such a role, and approximately 47% were either undecided or in disagreement with it. Taken in isolation, Question Eight could be read as a somewhat negative assessment; read in conjunction with Question Nine, it cannot be read so clearly. If almost 50% of the participants do not believe that the theatre needs to have such a direct role in community issues and needs, the fact that a similar percentage does not perceive such a link takes on a different meaning. That is, if the company is not doing something well that the respondents do not perceive as an important part of their mandate, the issue takes on lesser importance. Interestingly, in the written responses, the word “local” was mentioned only infrequently, and when it was, it was almost always in the context of showcasing local talent on the stage (with respondents in equal numbers perceiving the company as providing ample opportunity for “local talent to expand their horizons” and not doing so) rather than productions with local inflection, topicality, or relevance.

Survey respondents seem more concerned with the WCT producing shows that connect them to the broader world and instigate social discussion than with plays with a local content or with strong social commentary. As will become apparent, they have a variety of specific ideas on how the Western Canada Theatre can engage them as individuals – as well as their fellow audience members and the Kamloops and area community in general – even more fully.



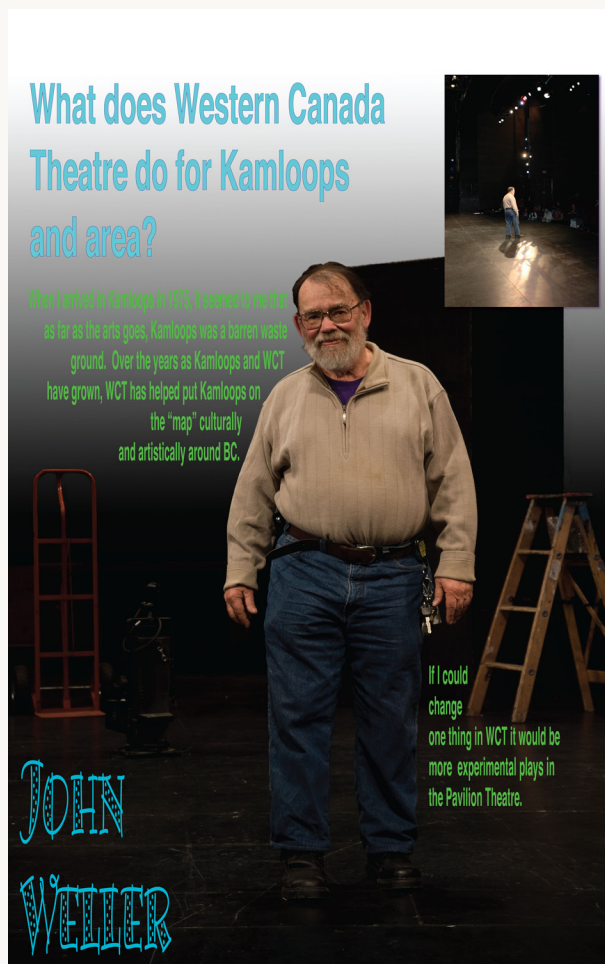
WHAT THE AUDIENCE WOULD DO

In response to the questions “If I could change one thing in WCT it would be _____” and “What WCT could do better is _____” participants devoted a considerable amount of space. I have found this the most useful section of the survey because it allows participants the opportunity to reflect on and respond to what most concerns them individually – to have a hand in the ongoing creation of the company, as it were. Although most responses were geared toward mainstage productions in the Sagebrush Theatre, some attention was paid to the Western Canada Theatre’s second venue, The Pavilion, which, it was suggested, could be utilized more frequently, specifically for more experimental plays and suitcase theatre, which was defined as “travelling shows with small troupes”.

A few respondents presented practical and logistical modifications, such as keeping up with technological change and adding public matinees to cater to seniors, specifically, as well as making the volume (sound levels) of the plays consistent throughout. In addition, more than one suggested that increasing the leg room in the seats would improve the theatrical experience, and, although some expressed appreciation for the comfort and quality of the mainstage venue, others suggested that the company should be provided with more “support and resources to upgrade facilities and equipment” or even a new facility.

Responses that indicated what participants would prefer in terms of play selection were hardly homogenous. Suggestions to “clean up the language” were as frequent as admonitions not to “cater...too much to prissy critics... that cannot stand foul language or risky content,” and encouragement to “be more edgy and risky” was as likely as requests to “produce more old-fashioned plays.” Clearly, there is a heterogeneity of preferences – likely more so than in mainstream professional theatres in larger cities, where the attendees are likely to be more homogenous because those with distinctly different preferences would have more opportunities to subscribe to other theatrical companies.

If there was no consensus about whether plays should be more or less mainstream, there was a certain amount of homogeneity among the responses that mentioned different genres. Several respondents specified comedies as their preference, mentioning “light-hearted subject matter” and requesting that the company “send [them] home feeling happy.” Musicals and “bigger” shows (perhaps because our survey coincided with the production of *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*) were also encouraged. Even here, though, there was not a clear consensus: One participant believes “They perform too many light plays” and requests more “classics.” A few expressed a preference for homegrown plays at the national level, with one asserting “The most important thing WCT does is showcase Canadian theatrical work on a small stage,” and yet another stating “I would put on more Canadian relevant plays.” Thus, it appears that balance and variety are key in play selection.



Like most mainstream theatres in Canada, (and, according to Bennett, across the Western world) Western Canada's subscriber base tends toward middle-aged and older, and participants' responses seemed to reflect an awareness of this fact and an acknowledgement of the company's need to attract younger audiences. To that end, more frequent productions geared to children (sometimes posited as a healthier alternative to electronic media) or "family-friendly" shows were suggested, along with the aforementioned idea of travelling to schools throughout the region.

In a 2005 study entitled "The Culture of Participation", Lon Dubinsky notes, "A distinctive feature of arts and heritage in Kamloops is a high degree of citizen involvement relative to both the size and scale of the city...consistent with involvement in other sectors of the community"(66). If there is an appetite for community involvement in this community, there is also an appetite among survey respondents for more direct interaction between the theatre company and its current audience. Suggestions include soliciting more audience feedback on individual plays, considering audience suggestions on future play selection, talk back and question-and-answer sessions with audience and production members, workshops, interactive theatre (such as theatre sports) and more frequent "talking about the community, instead of themselves." In sum, respondents advised "involving the community as more than audience," and demonstrated an eagerness to be more participatory in Western Canada Theatre.

CONCLUSIONS

If our modest survey is any indication, Western Canada Theatre clearly has a positive impact on its audience. The enthusiasm of audience members for our project, the sheer glee evident in many of the photos included in the exhibition and this journal issue, and the positive responses to the survey itself, reflect the important role that professional theatre plays in their lives. Culturally and socially, Western Canada theatre fills an important need – and does so well. The results of our study would seem to point to the conclusion that Western Canada Theatre, over the course of its history, has established a solid base of loyal support in the community.

It is also clear that the participants in *It's Your Cue: the Audience Show* are not merely tourists wanting to get a taste of the culture that they see WCT as providing; rather, they are fully engaged and eager to have a participatory role. Humans are social animals, and those took time from their busy schedules to answer our phone calls and appear in person to support of our research and the company are clear examples of that truism.

What is less clear what specific types of productions this group would like to see more frequently – individuals have distinct preferences. Although attending theatre is a social activity, "The individual's response to performance undoubtedly constitutes the core of the spectator's pleasure" (Bennett 155). What play genres and other features evoke that core pleasure is also individual. This points to the particular challenge for a professional theatre company in a small city: in larger areas with several professional companies, each theatre can develop a niche audience, but no such luxury is available when you are the only show in town.

Still, challenges are necessary for growth. Western Canada Theatre is fortunate to have an audience that hears it and perceives it as having significant meaning in their lives. The fact that the audience has an appetite for even greater engagement – with each other and with the company – as well as a variety of ideas on how that engagement could be accomplished is an even greater gift. Like the relationship between the tree in the forest and the audience, the relationship between a theatre company and its audience is symbiotic.

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