

These inside and outside spaces are all inhabited actually and imaginatively by actor and audience at the same time - almost as if the shared imagination of the occasion creates an exchange - the imagined interior of the cell becoming concrete as the walls of the theatre are imagined away in an almost infinite recession of each other.

1/7/99

Works cited

- Brecht, Bertolt *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Translated by James and Tania Stern with W.H.Auden) London:Methuen 1963
 Collins, Barry *Judgment* London:Faber 1974.
 Bachelard, Gaston *The Poetics of Space* Boston: Beacon Press 1969

UNDERSTANDING NEW AUDIENCES: AN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY OF 'NON-THEATRE GOERS' ATTENDING LA BOITE THEATRE COMPANY'S 1998 SEASON.

By Rebecca Scollen

Introduction

This research has rejected the experienced theatre goer as subject as has been studied in the past by those in the field (Pavis, 1985; Sauter, 1986; Gourdon, 1988; Deldime, 1990; Currathers & Mitchell, 1995; and Martin, 1995) and instead turns to those in the Brisbane community who do not regularly attend theatre productions and who vary in age, income and gender. This decision is based on an interest to understand potential audiences and discover their experiences of theatrical performance. It is anticipated that a knowledge of non-theatre goers' reactions to theatre will inform theatre companies and academia of their unique position in the arts.

As a PhD candidate at the Queensland University of Technology researching the field of audience reception studies, it has always been intended that the thesis be accessible and useful to the arts industry and academia. The model developed to gather and analyse audience responses to performance is tested and applied to practical situations to demonstrate its success for audience reception and development purposes. It is for this reason, I found it necessary to work with the public and collaborate with a local professional theatre company.

The La Boite Theatre audience reception study of 1998 was a successful venture. In terms of the PhD research great amounts of data was generated, positive results recorded, the methodology was proven sound, and respondents were satisfied with the process. For La Boite Theatre Company the study informed them of the attitudes of a number of non-theatre goers to their company, of their responses to each production, and also received immediate ticket sales and word of mouth promotion during the study.

The aims and objectives of the study, its methodology and some of the results will now be explained in greater detail. The relationship with La Boite Theatre Company will be outlined, along with the success of this collaborative research venture.

Pilot study of 1997

The pilot study's aim was to test the methodologies I had chosen to gather audience responses to performance in order to evaluate the worthiness or appropriateness of Sauter's (1986) model to Brisbane audiences when combined with other methodical approaches.

The pilot results demonstrated that an extended study utilising similar research methods was worthwhile because the study was very successful and produced important data for theatre companies and theatre audience research. Indirectly, it was discovered this form of data collection could be a sound method for introducing new audiences to theatre and informing them about the artform in a non-threatening way.

It seemed increased knowledge of theatre could lead to increased confidence and interest thus leading to an increase in future patronage.

In order to test this theory and apply the methodology to a larger number of respondents I sought a theatre company that would collaborate in this research.

1998 Audience Reception Study at La Boite Theatre Company

Having completed and assessed my pilot study, I approached La Boite Theatre Company in October 1997 to propose a collaborative industry research venture. La Boite Theatre Company was eager to incorporate my research skills and expertise in the field of reception studies to conduct research that would detail audiences' responses to their 1998 season of plays (February - August).¹ We agreed that I would collect and analyse the responses of three groups of twelve participants and then present the results to La Boite Theatre Company in early 1999 in the form of a written report. In return La Boite Theatre Company would issue me with complimentary tickets for all group members and would provide a quiet room after each performance to conduct group interviews.

La Boite Theatre Company

La Boite is a professional theatre company that can be seen to be positioned between the larger state company and smaller professional and amateur companies in Brisbane. It attempts to target all members of our community via its choices of repertoire and ticket price. The company prides itself on presenting Australian work with a number of its productions written in Queensland. This was of interest to me, because I had found with the pilot study that the two Australian productions were the most enjoyed by all participants. I felt that to take non-theatre goers to see primarily Australian work would perhaps interest them according to the pilot result. Ticket price ranges from \$18 concession to \$27 employed, with preview nights offering greater discounts. Ticket price appears to be positioned between the more expensive Queensland Theatre Company and the less expensive smaller professional and amateur companies in Brisbane.

La Boite Theatre Company has a commitment to developing its audience base and so was willing to collaborate in this research venture. La Boite Theatre Company is also a theatre-in-the-round and so its special dynamics are conducive to audience participation and close involvement with the drama. This in itself encouraged me to work with La Boite Theatre Company as this environment is unique to Brisbane and is a wonderful space for audiences to experience theatrical performance. I felt that this theatre would be well suited to my audience reception study, as the space itself is an audience friendly space that insists that performers play to audience members directly and sometimes individually as opposed to other spaces such as the proscenium arch theatre which demands its actors play out to a crowd.

Constitution of Groups

The 1998 La Boite reception study contains three groups of twelve participants. As decided by La Boite Theatre Company, the audience members consisted of 18 males and 18 females. In each group there were two of each gender in the 20s, 30-40s and 50+ age group. Breaking this down further, one of each gender in each age category was earning under \$15 000 p/a and the other was earning over \$15 000 p/a. All participants were non-regular theatre goers and lived in a variety of Brisbane suburbs.

¹ The productions for 1998 included: *The John Wayne Principle*, *Emma Celebrazione!*, *The Conjurors*, *Speaking in Tongues*, *X-Stacey* and *A Beautiful Life*.

Aims and Objectives of the 1998 study

Aims

1. The primary aim of the project was to expose the perceptions of thirty-six non-theatre goers to La Boite Theatre Company's 1998 season.
2. To gain an understanding of the unique experiences of these members of the Brisbane community who do not regularly attend La Boite Theatre Company via the responses received through questionnaires and focus group interviews.

Objectives

1. The primary objective of this project was to arrive at a working model that can be applied by industry members or academics to successfully research and analyse audience responses by utilising the methodological and analytical innovations presented in this thesis.
2. To arrive at a better understanding of 'non-theatre going' culture in Brisbane and the circumstances which prevent theatre attendance.
3. To provide the 'non-theatre going' public with the skills for understanding/reading performance so that they will be encouraged to become theatre goers.

Methodology

This research is unique because it is not interested in Brisbane theatre audience demographics and does not endeavour to seek the critical analyses of audience members to the performances they experience. Instead, the primary aim of this project was to expose the perceptions of thirty-six non-theatre goers to La Boite Theatre Company's 1998 season and to gain an understanding of members of the Brisbane community who do not regularly attend La Boite Theatre Company.

As is the case with an ethnographic inquiry, the intention of observing and interviewing a social group is not to study people necessarily, but to learn from them (Spradley, 1979:3). The aspects of performance that they choose to talk about and the ways in which they communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other, is of great interest to me. It is an undertaking that places much power in the hands of the groups under observation, and it is this emphasis that makes it unique, because the central purpose of this study, as developed from the pilot, was to better understand non-theatre goers living in Brisbane.

The endeavour to learn about non-theatre going culture and the unique views of its members inspired me to turn away from conventional retrieval methods such as the structured questionnaire and the one to one interview, where responses are limited by the questions one asks and are produced by members in isolation. Instead the locus of the inquiry came to rely upon the focus group discussion method.

This is not to say that I have turned away from the structured questionnaire altogether as a valuable tool for data collection and validation, it simply means that a strong emphasis is placed upon the discussions and supported by questionnaires for validation of results.

The primary model utilised in the 1997 pilot study and again in the research for 1998, was directly influenced by the research of Sauter et al. (1986) and Lidstone (1996).

I have adapted and combined these two models to arrive at a methodology for gathering

audience responses to performance. It is this same methodology that I hope to prove is a sound technique for encouraging new audiences to attend theatre by increasing their knowledge of theatre and their confidence in theatre going.

My interest in focus group discussions emerged after becoming aware of research that had taken place in Stockholm where Willmar Sauter developed his 1986 **Theatre Talks** model. In order to establish background information including recreational and social habits, Sauter gave participants a questionnaire to complete. Sauter then incorporated **Theatre Talks** as a method for retrieving the experiences of theatrical performances from small groups of audience members. In order to achieve this ambition, audiences were taken to a comfortable, and informal setting and were encouraged to talk about the performance they had seen amongst themselves; not unlike a group of friends having a coffee and chatting after a show. These open group interviews were led by a moderator to direct the conversation, so participants could respond to a particular set of questions created by Sauter for his research.

Sauter was seeking to prove his hypothesis and so needed participants to respond to set questions. I did not as I was more interested in learning from participants rather than studying them. I was seeking to discover what aspects of performance were most dominant or most important to participants thus I did not wish to present them with specific questions or topics for discussion. It was just as important to take note of the things they did not discuss as those that they did. I was not seeking to prove any hypothesis on what audiences talk about or why. The different emphases in our research ensured I needed to look to other focus group models to combine with Sauter's to arrive at a methodology that would best suit my aims and objectives. I needed a method that would allow me as researcher to listen and observe participants talking together in a group without intervention from me.

This is where John Lidstone's 1996 Synergetic Focus group model became very important for my research. The researcher/facilitator in the synergetic process, raises the overall topic for discussion (in this case audience members' responses to the performance just seen) and then encourages all members to put forward their opinions and personal experiences to the group in regards to the topic specified. From this time on the researcher sits back from the group; denies all eye contact with members, and takes notes on what is said and done throughout the discussion. It is the energy of the respondents within the group and the questions and thoughts they raise that keeps the discussion going. It is totally void of researcher comments and questions, thus it is close to a truthful response; as it is not lead by the researcher.

The desire to remain detached from the group so as not to directly influence members' thinking patterns or responses, made the synergetic model appealing for this study. Following the structure of this model, I broadly informed respondents of the topic under discussion and ensured each group member that their comments were of importance to the study and all opinions were valid.

Respondents were also asked to give an example from the performance to support the comments they raised in discussion.² However, the physical detachment of the moderator as outlined by Lidstone (1996), was not incorporated in this study. Rather than remove myself entirely from the process, it was my belief that the discussion would flow more easily and less stressfully if I played an active listener role. In this limited

² Group members were informed this was needed so other members could understand the points they were making. However, the primary reason for giving examples was so respondents could become comfortable talking about specific aspects of performance and feel confident in expressing an informed opinion.

leadership capacity I was seated within the circle of group members and gained eye contact with each of them.

I made this alteration to Lidstone's model because the participants involved were not experts in the field and were strangers to each other. One example of Lidstone's model in action revolves around a group of Geography teachers discussing geography. In this situation, one could assume that the researcher would be reasonably comfortable in leaving this group to its own devices as they identify themselves and each other as experts in the field that they are discussing. In the example of Sauter's study addressed earlier, the group members knew each other from work or from a social club and therefore felt comfortable with each other even though they may not have considered themselves experts in the field of theatre going or theatre making.

My group members were strangers to each other and not experts in the field of theatre going so I anticipated that they would feel insecure and possibly shy about discussing their thoughts and feelings about performances amongst themselves. The participants in my 1998 La Boite study were non-theatre goers and so did not feel they could give expert opinions on the performances they attend.

The underlying principle of the synergetic focus group model to place great responsibility upon group members to communicate with each other is upheld in my adaptation of the method. However the moderator's role is adapted to ensure members feel secure with each other.

Methods

- 1) A **written questionnaire** (About You) was given to each participant early in 1998 to gather demographic information pertaining to the participants, and their attitudes towards theatre and La Boite Theatre Company.
- 2) A second **written questionnaire** (Tonight's/Today's Performance) was issued immediately before group discussions began, and was designed for members to rate each performance and to specify aspects of the performances that aided their enjoyment and understanding of the play.
- 3) Tape recorded **focus group interviews** with a strong emphasis placed upon the participants rather than the moderator were held after performances.
- 4) A **follow-up written questionnaire** (Feedback) was given to respondents at the end of the 1998 season to discover the attitudes and opinions of group members to the performances seen, La Boite Theatre Company, and the study itself. It is here, members were asked if attitudes towards theatre and La Boite Theatre Company have changed, and if they would be willing to attend theatre performances in the future and encourage others to do the same.
- 5) **Future contact with participants** will take place at the conclusion of La Boite Theatre Company's 1999 season to discover how many participants have attended one or more of La Boite Theatre Company's productions.

Analysis

This research employs qualitative analytical methods due to the qualitative nature of the data it collects.

The implementation of **ethnographic analysis** ensures focus is placed directly upon the groups' comments to interpret the feelings and thoughts of thirty-six individuals. Direct

quotations are presented to show the reader exactly what members have said, to ensure the focus of the analysis is upon the focus group members and their words, rather than limiting it to the researcher's understanding of their words and intentions.

Content analysis (although quantitative) is also incorporated, to gain a perspective on the number of times certain aspects may be raised or how often members may speak, to give an overall impression of regularity and continuity within group sessions. Its purpose is to add strength to the ethnographic approach applied by giving a systematic tallying of the key topics identified in the group sessions (Morgan, 1988:64).

The structure chosen to present the data and its subsequent interpretation has been strongly influenced by the models of **Knodel (1993)** and **Krueger (1988)**. Knodel offers a table containing focus group discussion guidelines, as prepared by the researcher, to label major topics, subtopics and probes (in Morgan, 1993:38). This study has appropriated the notion of the table and used it to breakdown the discussions for analysis, rather than as a tool to set guidelines for the structure of the discussion.

Knodel	Major Topic	Subtopics	Probes
Scollen	Major Issue	Main Points	Examples

(Scollen, 1997)

Knodel's discussion of break characteristics and control characteristics within the research design applies to this study (in Morgan, 1993:39). Knodel's model combines successfully with Krueger's model (1988) as it helps to break down the interview responses into segments to code and interpret, thus laying the path for analysis. Krueger's 'Analysis Continuum' (1988:109) begins the analysis by listing and coding the raw data, it then progresses with descriptive statements to summarise the results, and then concludes with an interpretation of these results to provide understanding. This model is applied because its structure is clear and logical, and offers a natural progression of the analysis of the data, from start to finish, for the researcher and the reader of the report.

The Analysis Continuum

Raw data <---> Descriptive Statements <---> Interpretation

(Krueger, 1988:109)

An expose` of La Boite Theatre Company ensures the results are not presented in a vacuum. The findings are not to be considered representative of all non-theatre goers or of all theatre companies in Brisbane, but are a detailed exposition of thirty-six participants and their reactions to a specific theatre at a specific time in history. By framing my audience reception study at La Boite Theatre Company with a history of the company's repertoire, aims and policies the results will not only reflect the thoughts and feelings of thirty-six participants but will make comment on the decisions and ambitions of a professional theatre company in Brisbane. By demonstrating the importance of the study's results in relation to La Boite Theatre Company, the study acts as a model to be utilised in the future by other theatre companies needing to identify the reasons members of the community do not attend their productions and to discover what their reactions are to the companies once they are encouraged to attend.

Results

A brief summary of results is presented stemming from the post performance questionnaires, post performance focus group discussions, and the feedback questionnaire. When comparing the three groups' responses against each other, it appears that overall each group has responded to the various aspects of the productions in a very similar manner.

Post Performance Questionnaire results (brief summary)

Expectation

Group expectation was concerned with the quality of each production and with specific aspects of the productions that members may have read or heard about prior to attendance. There were few expectations of the storylines or the theatre company. One third to one half of the total number of group members had some expectation of what the productions would be like.

Enjoyment

All six productions were enjoyed by group members (see Appendix 1). *X-Stacy* and *The John Wayne Principle* were the most enjoyable productions overall. The actors/acting and dialogue best helped group members to enjoy the productions. The actors/acting was highly enjoyed in all six productions. It seems that group members can enjoy the acting even if their enjoyment of the production is low. It also appears that for group members to enjoy a performance it is important for them to relate to the story and to the characters (see Appendix 2).

Understanding

The dialogue and actors/acting best helped group members to understand the story in each of the productions. The descriptions of the stories by all groups were very similar for *Emma Celebrazione!*, *The Conjurers* and *Speaking in Tongues*. For the most part, the descriptions of the productions read like messages or themes rather than as a series of events. There was general consensus of the main protagonist in each production.

The description of the messages by all groups were very similar for *Emma Celebrazione!*, *The Conjurers*, and *Speaking in Tongues*. A pattern emerged where the responses of group members to these three productions were similar for story and message in comparison to the other three productions. This demonstrates that *Emma Celebrazione!*, *The Conjurers*, and *Speaking in Tongues* were simpler in their structure and easier to describe by the majority. The other three productions although fraught with a variety of responses for story and message were the most enjoyed productions. This variety of responses suggests that they may have had a multiplicity of messages and stories and that the group members identified strongly with the fiction. There was consensus amongst all groups of the genres of each production. Finally, on average all groups rated the acting style of each production as naturalistic.

Post performance group discussion results (brief summary)

Story/character

The story and characters were central to the discussions of all groups to all productions. The messages, the issues, the structure and time frame of the fiction, the characters' functions and motivations, and the reasons why group members could relate to the story and characters were discussed at length. For certain productions there was much consideration of title choices and the meanings of the plays' conclusions.

The discussion of story and character follow on and develop from the short statements given by members in the post performance questionnaires. By far these two aspects of the productions were the most referred to of all elements of performance. According to the groups' responses all other aspects of the productions were there to create and support the story and the characters and so were referred to less in discussion.

Actors/Acting

Apart from the story and characters, the actors and the acting was consistently referred to by all groups for all productions. Every group discussion included talk about the reasons why members enjoyed the actors and the acting. Almost every group discussion included talk about the use of doubling and its effect on character portrayal. Other discussion pertaining to the actors/acting varied from group to group, production to production.

Confidence

As participants became more comfortable and confident sharing their thoughts and feelings with others, and more equipped to support their ideas with examples from the performances, the group discussions became more complex and informed.

Feedback Questionnaire (some results)

All participants enjoyed their involvement in the study and said they would encourage others to take part in a study such as this. **Listening to others ideas** and **Thinking more about performances** were rated very highly by all groups as the primary reasons for enjoying the discussions. These aspects were followed by high responses for **Getting to know other people**, **Giving their opinions**, and **Learning about theatre**. **Knowing their thoughts were valued by the researcher/theatre company** was also considered an important factor in discussion enjoyment.

The majority of group members believed the risk involved when attending live theatre had been lessened by their attendance at La Boite Theatre Company 1998 season. All participants except one stated they intended to attend La Boite Theatre Company's productions in the future. Almost all participants stated they intended to encourage others to attend La Boite Theatre Company's productions in the future, and had already done so throughout the study.

Over half of all groups stated they would be more likely to attend theatre productions if there were discussions afterwards. The majority of all groups felt they had a greater knowledge of theatre and were more interested in theatre after partaking in the study.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that the methodology applied successfully gathers audience responses to performance in a non-obtrusive and empowering way. Respondents feel their thoughts are valued and over time increase their knowledge of theatre performance and their confidence in theatre going. La Boite Theatre received detailed feedback on all of their productions, gained insight into the attitudes of non-theatre goers to their company, pricing, and promotions. Throughout the study respondents spoke to friends and family about the performances they attended and encouraged them to attend on many occasions. A number of people did attend as a result of that recommendation. All but one respondent stated they intended on attending La Boite Theatre Company in 1999 as they enjoyed the productions, and their part in the study.

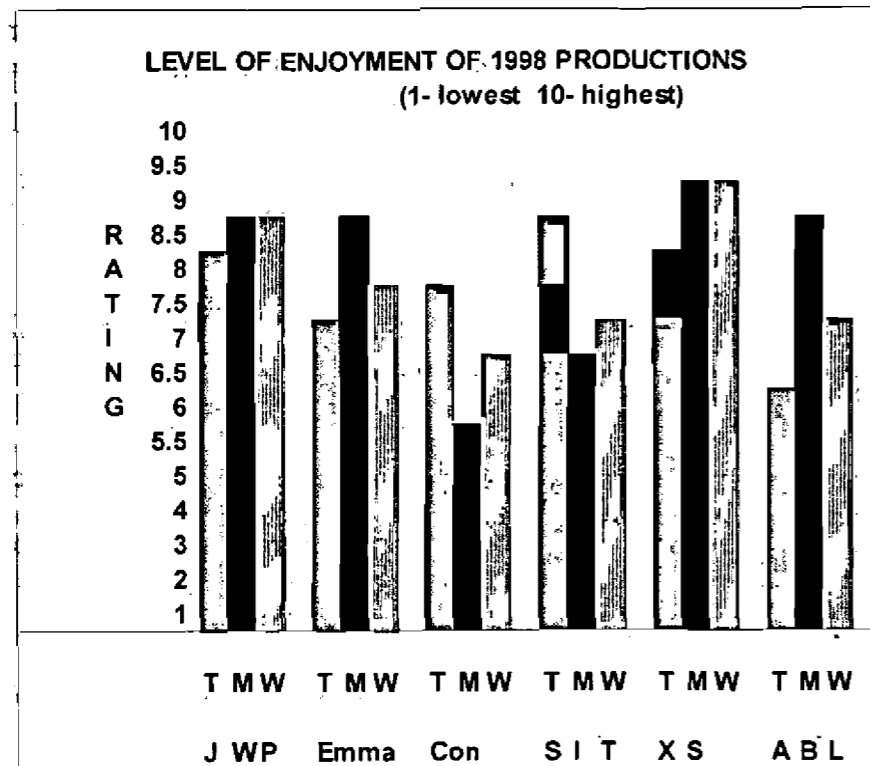
Although the group of thirty-six respondents, are not representative of all non-theatre goers, trends were apparent across the three groups in this study which could be indicative of thoughts of other non theatre goers if tested on larger scale.

References

- Carruthers, I & Mitchell, P. (1995) "Theatre East and West: Problems of Difference or Problems of Perception? (Suzuki Tadashi's Australian *Macbeth*, 1992)" in *Asian Studies Papers - Research Series 5*, Victoria: La Trobe University.
- Deldime, R. (1990) 'A Psychological Approach to the Memory of the Spectator', in Sauter W. (ed.) *Nordic Theatre Studies: New Directions in Theatre Research*, Stockholm: Stockholm University Press, pp. 132 - 139.
- Gourdon, A. (1988) 'Theatre, Audience, Perception', in Sauter, W. (ed.) *Nordic Theatre Studies: Advances in Reception and Audience Research*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 27 - 35.
- Knodel, J (1993) 'The design and analysis of focus group studies: A practical approach' in Morgan D.L (ed.) *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the state of the art*, California: SAGE Publications pp. 35-50.
- Krueger, R.A (1988) *Focus groups: A Practical Guide to Applied Research*, London: SAGE Publications.
- Lidstone, J. (1996) 'Synergetic Focus Group Discussions: Rapid Access to Rich Data', in Gerber, R. & Williams, M. *Qualitative Research in Geographical Education*, Armidale: University of New England Press pp. 159 - 168.
- Martin, J. & Sauter, W. (1995) *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Morgan, D. L. (1988) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, London: SAGE Publications.
- Pavis, P. (1985) 'Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire', in *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, pp. 208 - 212.
- Sauter, W. (1986) 'Theatre Talks: Or How to Find Out What the Spectator Thinks' in *Nordic Theatre Studies: Advances in Reception and Audience Research* vol. 5, pp.136 -145.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*, Philadelphia: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers.

Appendix 1

Please indicate on the scale below your level of enjoyment of the performance just seen.
(1 - lowest to 10 - highest)



There is a high level of enjoyment for all productions with scores ranging from 5.5 to 9. *X-Stacy* is the most enjoyed production for all groups, while *The Conjurers* is least enjoyed by all.

Appendix 2

Could you relate to the story?

The John Wayne Principle Tuesday group Yes = 91%
Matinee group Yes = 100%
Wednesday group Yes = 75%

Emma Celebrazione! Tuesday group Yes = 91%
Matinee group Yes = 90%
Wednesday group Yes = 72%

The Conjurers Tuesday group Yes = 77%
Matinee group Yes = 44%
Wednesday group Yes = 60%

Speaking in Tongues Tuesday group Yes = 81%
Matinee group Yes = 66%
Wednesday group Yes = 80%

X-Stacy Tuesday group Yes = 100%
Matinee group Yes = 80%
Wednesday group Yes = 100%

A Beautiful Life Tuesday group Yes = 37.5%
Matinee group Yes = 90%
Wednesday group Yes = 80%

Group members appear to have had some difficulty relating to the story of *The Conjurers* and to some extent *Speaking in Tongues*. Many members of the Tuesday group did not relate to the story in *A Beautiful Life*.

Appendix 2

Could you relate to the characters on stage?

<i>The John Wayne Principle</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 100%
	Matinee group	Yes = 90%
	Wednesday group	Yes = 83%
<i>Emma Celebrazione!</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 81%
	Matinee group	Yes = 80%
	Wednesday group	Yes = 100%
<i>The Conjurers</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 77%
	Matinee group	Yes = 66%
	Wednesday group	Yes = 50%
<i>Speaking in Tongues</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 81%
	Matinee group	Yes = 66%
	Wednesday group	Yes = 50%
<i>X-Stacy</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 80%, 20% no answer
	Matinee group	Yes = 80%, 20% no answer
	Wednesday group	Yes = 100%
<i>A Beautiful Life</i>	Tuesday group	Yes = 37.5%
	Matinee group	Yes = 80%
	Wednesday group	Yes = 70%

Again a number of group members had some difficulty relating to the characters of *The Conjurers* and *Speaking in Tongues*, while the Tuesday group continued to have problems relating to the characters of *A Beautiful Life*.

Appendix 2

The low percentages of the Tuesday group to *A Beautiful Life* (37% relate to story, 37% relate to character) appear to link with the low enjoyment rating of 6 (see Appendix 1) for the production (the lowest score this group has given a production). This same trend is apparent with the Matinee and Wednesday groups for *The Conjurers*, where they have given low scores for relating to characters and story and have given a low score for enjoyment of the production. The enjoyment of *Speaking in Tongues* by the Matinee and Wednesday groups is higher than *The Conjurers*, however, a similar trend can be seen here. The same statistic is displayed for both productions by these two groups when relating to characters, while the response is a little higher for *Speaking in Tongues* when relating to the story. The higher result for relation to story could be the factor that lifts the enjoyment rating above that of *The Conjurers* but lower than the other productions.