

New Audiences' Reception of Plays (before, during and after)
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Introduction

This paper provides insight into the reception of non-theatre-goers to a selection of plays performed in Queensland and the Northern Territory in 2004 and 2005. This data was collected and analysed as part of a three-year regional audience development project: *Talking Theatre: An audience development programme for regional Queensland and the Northern Territory (2004-2006)*. The research was funded by the Australian Research Council, NARPACA¹, Arts Queensland, Arts Northern Territory, and the Queensland University of Technology. *Talking Theatre* sought to build new audiences both in the short and long terms for performing arts centres (PACs) participating in 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 which presented them.

By listening to the views of the selected participants in each of the fourteen regions, the PACs were in a stronger position to make effective decisions to impact positively on this significant segment of the community – interested non-theatre-goers. For participants in *Talking Theatre*, the research provided the opportunity to directly experience three live performances in a theatre setting. This introduction worked to break down some of the barriers that had prevented their attendance in the past. Post-performance data gathering sessions created a safe and friendly discussion environment which assisted the participants, via self-reflection and engagement with others' ideas, to learn about theatre and theatre-going. This sharing of information led to increased understanding of non-theatre-goers and their needs by the PACs, as well as an increased interest in live performances and a greater confidence to attend in the future by the participants.

Local media and corporate email were utilised to inform the fourteen regional communities of the research and the need for participants. Those members of the public interested in participating contacted the PACs directly to register their details. Potential participants were screened to check that they were aged between eighteen and fifty-five years, living in the local area, and had not attended their local PAC before (if they had it was seen to be very rare). Each of the PACs selected three live performances for the participants to attend. They presented a mix of genres to provide the participants with variety, such as plays, opera, contemporary dance, stand-up comedy, musicals, ballet, and orchestras. The twenty-four participants chosen in each region were divided into two

¹ Northern Australia Regional Performing Arts Centres Association

groups of twelve to attend each of the three performances together, as well as the three post-performance sessions.

Once the participants were selected, information was gathered about them via an *About You* questionnaire that was sent to their homes and completed prior to attending the first performance in *Talking Theatre*. Directly after experiencing each of the three free shows on offer, the participants individually completed the *Tonight's Performance* questionnaire, and then collectively discussed their reception of the shows, and other topics that arose about theatregoing. A few weeks following the final performance in *Talking Theatre* another questionnaire was sent to participants to complete. This *Feedback* questionnaire sought the participants' attitudes to the research, to their local PAC, and to the possibility of their future attendance at live performance.

This paper presents some of the findings, derived from all four of the above data gathering tools, of the participants' reception of the plays presented at the PACs in 2004 and 2005. Eleven of the participating PACs² chose to include a play as one of their three performance offerings in the *Talking Theatre* project. In total ten plays³ were presented, with two plays each performed at two participating PACs. In all instances, the plays were part of a state or national tour to regional Queensland and the Northern Territory.

BEFORE – Preference and Expectation

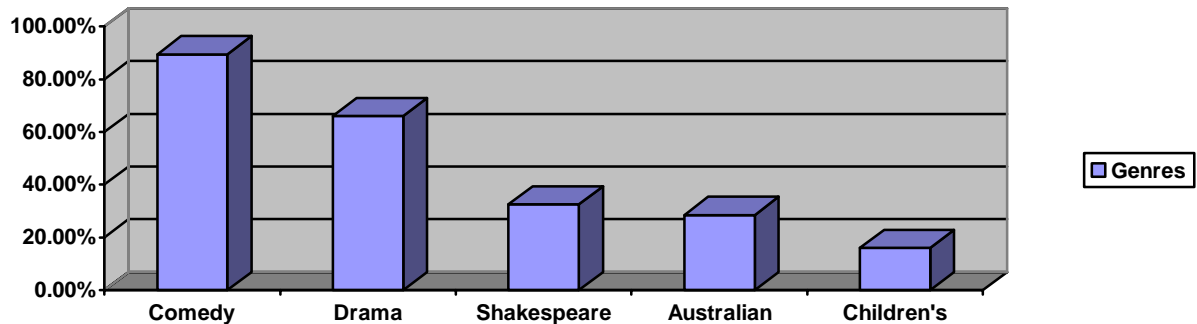
One of the questions in the *About You* questionnaire asked the non-theatregoers participating in the research to indicate if they had any preferences for live performance. Types of performance were separated into categories: theatre, music, dance, and other. The most common preferences for theatre by the participants (prior to attendance) were comedy; drama; Shakespearean; Australian; and children's (see graph 1). Ninety percent of the sample stated that they thought they would prefer to see a comedy. This result was not surprising as the participants had already stated they liked to relax and have fun during their leisure time. Their familiarity with comedy as a genre and their knowledge that this genre was usually light-hearted and easy to engage with, ensured that comedies were the most popular across all regions. At the other end of the spectrum, 16% of the

² Darwin Entertainment Centre, Empire Theatre in Toowoomba, Townsville Civic Theatre, Caloundra Cultural Centre, Ipswich Civic Hall, Mount Isa Civic Centre, Nambour Civic Centre, Mackay Entertainment Centre, Araluen Centre in Alice Springs, Cairns Civic Theatre, and Pilbeam Theatre in Rockhampton.

³ *Last Cab to Darwin* (Darwin); *Skin Tight* (Toowoomba); *Second Childhood* (Townsville); *ZigZag St* (Caloundra); *Barmaids* (Ipswich); *My Brilliant Divorce* (Mount Isa); *Late Nite Catechism* (Nambour); *President Wilson in Paris* (Mackay); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Alice Springs and Townsville); and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Cairns and Rockhampton).

sample indicated they would like to attend children’s plays. This result illustrated that these participants were seeking plays as entertainment options for the family rather than for themselves.

GRAPH 1 - Preferences for Theatre Prior to Attendance



As it turned out, the selection of plays in the *Talking Theatre* project corresponded with one or more of the participants’ top five theatre preferences⁴. This finding reflected the publicly-funded PACs’ commitment to presenting live performances that aimed to be of interest to many in the local community.

Participants were asked if they had any expectations about the play they were to attend in the *Talking Theatre* project. They were then asked to state their expectations and to indicate what created this expectation. On average 46% of the sample indicated that they had expectations about the play prior to attendance. Of course, this percentage varied upon examination of participant expectation in relation to individual plays and the regions in which they were presented⁵. Of note here was the discovery that over half of the sample had no expectations of the plays they were to attend in the *Talking Theatre* project. They mentioned to the researcher that they were ‘willing to give it a go’ and ‘were going in with an open mind’ but had no idea what the plays were about or whether they might enjoy them.

This finding pointed to a pressing problem that impacts on theatre attendance. Should the public pay to attend plays when they have little understanding of what to expect from the experience?

⁴ *Last Cab to Darwin* – Australian Comedy/Drama; *Skin Tight* – Australian Drama; *Second Childhood* – Australian Children’s Drama; *ZigZag St* – Australian Comedy; *Barmaids* - Australian Comedy; *My Brilliant Divorce* – Comedy; *Late Nite Catechism* - Australian Comedy; *President Wilson in Paris* – Comedy/Drama; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – Shakespearean Romantic Comedy; and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* - Shakespearean Romantic Comedy.

⁵ *Last Cab to Darwin* (73%); *Skin Tight* (27%); *Second Childhood* (20%); *ZigZag St* (44%); *Barmaids* (43%); *My Brilliant Divorce* (40%); *Late Nite Catechism* (44%); *President Wilson in Paris* (43%); *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Townsville - 50% and Alice Springs – 52%); and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Cairns – 63% and Rockhampton - 50%).

Why is there not stronger emphasis when marketing and promoting the plays to indicate plot, central issues, aspects the public may relate to/the play's relevance to everyday life, details about the genre (where appropriate), the play's similarity to other popular artforms, and the ticket prices? This problem does not lie solely at the feet of the PACs who publicise the events touring to their regions. It is also the responsibility of theatre makers and promoters to market their products in this way, as well as to provide the information to the PACs so they can inform the public and sell more tickets.

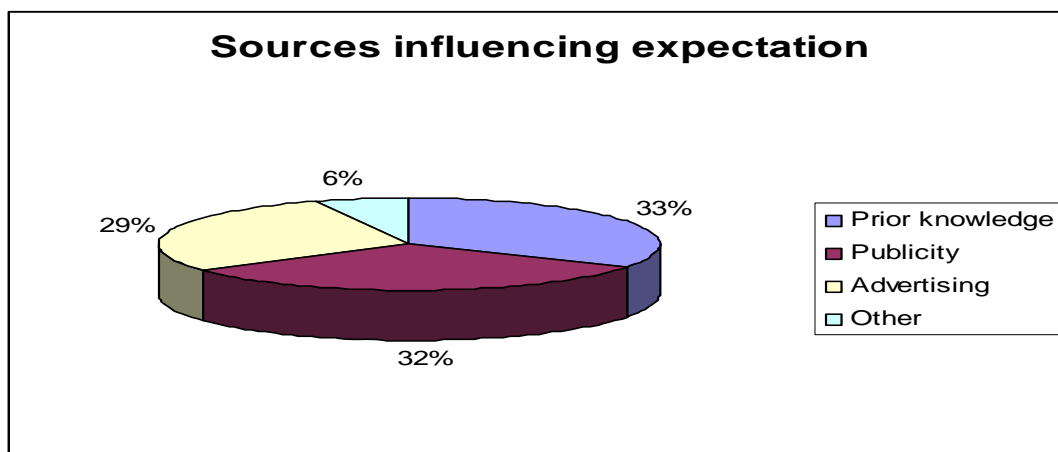
For those 46% of the sample with expectations, it was found that most of their expectations were broad in nature, and related mainly to the genre of the plays. For example, they knew it was a comedy so they expected it to be humorous or enjoyable. They were unsure of the type of comedy in the plays, which prevented more specific expectations. So for the majority of the participants, there was little idea prior to attendance of what the plays were about or how they might engage with them. However, there were some specific expectations for the Shakespearean plays and for *Last Cab to Darwin* and *Skin Tight*. These specific expectations related to elements in performance, plot, or personal reactions the participants anticipated they might have. For the Shakespearean plays, many participants expected certain elements in performance, such as period costume, Old English, and a traditional presentation. Further to this, these participants expected the plays would be boring and difficult to understand (personal reactions). For others, the Shakespearean plays were expected to contain good acting, extravagant sets, and to present a classic, highly-respected playwright's work. For these participants their expected personal reactions were excitement and enjoyment. Prior knowledge of Shakespearean plays (school, films, cultural references) was the key influencing factor for many of those with expectations.

Specific expectations that detailed plot referred solely to *Last Cab to Darwin*. Some of the participants knew prior to attendance that this play was about a dying man's journey to Darwin to be euthanized. Personal reactions expected by these participants were to be depressed, sad, or moved. Others indicated elements in performance that they expected, such as good acting, well-directed, Australian characters, and the Australian spirit. For these participants, expectations of personal reactions were excitement, amusement, and enjoyment. Publicity (articles and editorial in the media) was the key influencing factor for many of those with expectations of *Last Cab to Darwin*. Finally, the specific expectation of *Skin Tight* was that it would contain nudity. For some participants this was off-putting as they expected the nudity to be sexually related and promiscuous. For others the knowledge that there would be adult nudity made them curious and they expected

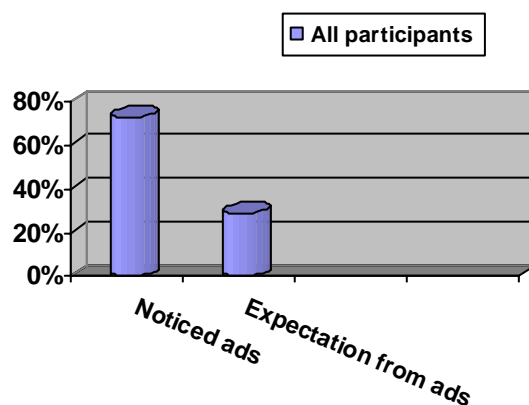
that it would be linked to romance. Advertising was the key influencing factor for many of those with expectations of this play.

Across the sample of participants who attended plays in the *Talking Theatre* project and indicated they had expectations, prior knowledge, publicity and advertising were the most common sources for generating expectation (Graph 2). Three quarters of the entire sample noticed advertising for the plays, but less than a third of the sample stated that the advertisements helped them to generate expectation (Graph 3). It appeared that the advertising raised their awareness that the plays were to be performed but it did not provide enough information to build expectations or to produce significant interest in many of the participants. This exposition of participant preferences and expectations gives insight into non-theatre-goers' reception of the plays before attendance.

GRAPH 2 – Sources Influencing Expectation



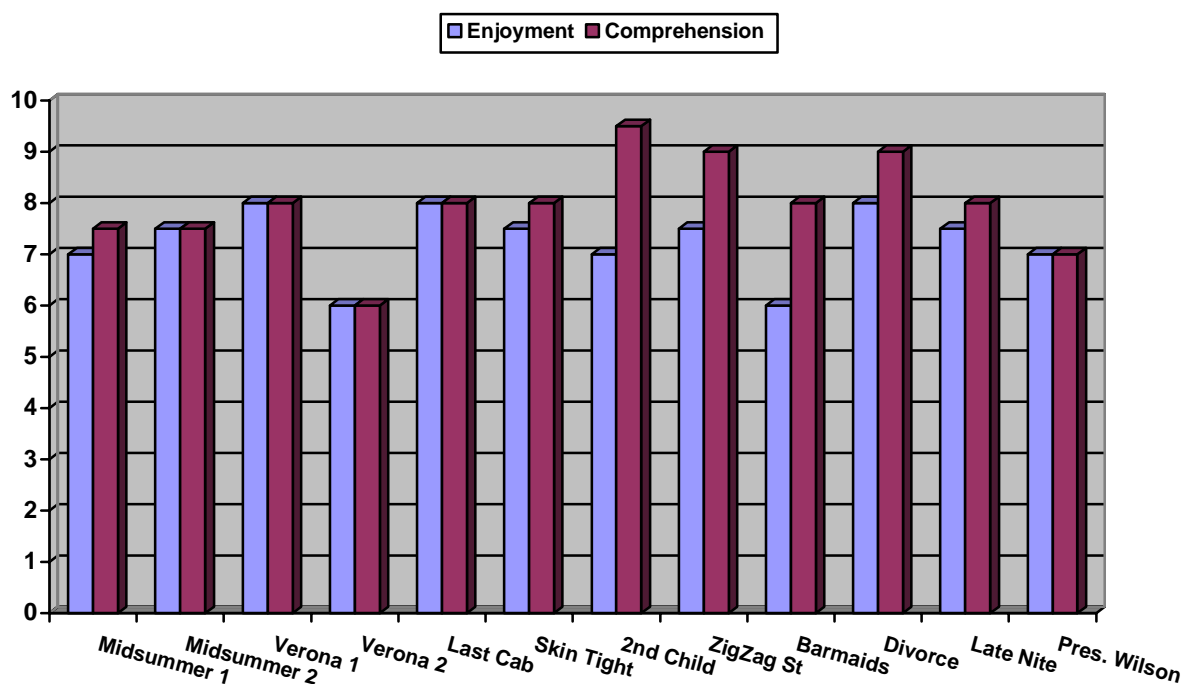
GRAPH 3 – Advertising and Expectation



DURING – Enjoyment, Comprehension, Key Aspects in Performance

Participants were asked to rate their levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the plays they attended in the *Talking Theatre* project. They were also to indicate the key aspects in performance that helped them to enjoy and to understand the plays. These series of questions made up part of the *Tonight's Performance* questionnaire the participants completed immediately after attending the performances. The results suggested that overall the entire sample highly enjoyed and well understood the plays that they attended. Graph 4 illustrates the average ratings of enjoyment and comprehension of the participants for each play. After calculation of the average ratings across the entire sample, all the plays were given a rating of 7 out of 10 for enjoyment and a rating of 8 out of 10 for comprehension. This finding suggested that the plays selected by the PACs to show to their local communities were appropriate for new audiences. It also demonstrated that non-theatre-goers were more than capable of engaging with the plays.

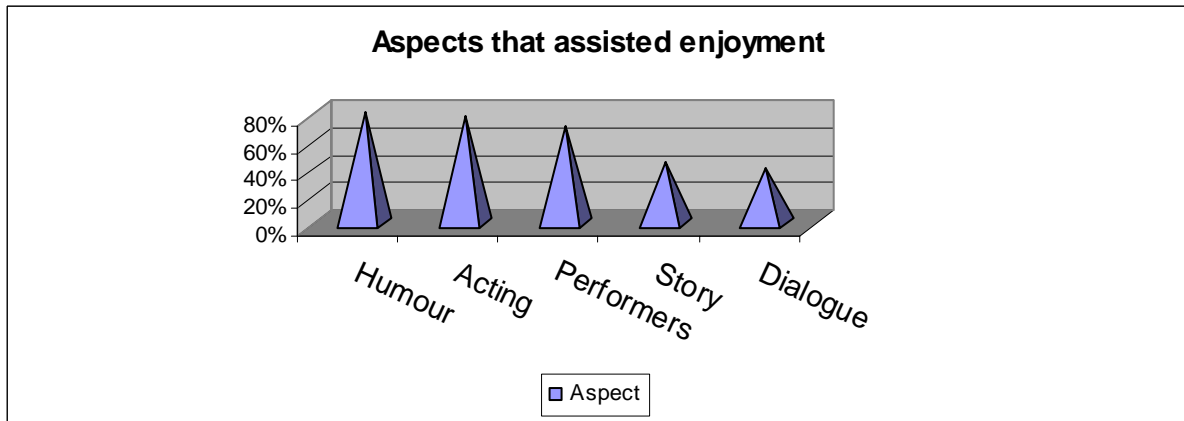
GRAPH 4 – Enjoyment and Comprehension Ratings



The most popular aspects in performance that assisted the participants' enjoyment of all ten plays were: the humour, the acting, the performers, the story, and the dialogue (see Graph 5). The very high percentage of the sample that enjoyed the humour corresponded closely with the participants' preferences for comedy and enjoyable leisure time. The acting and the performers were important in creating enjoyment because they helped to bring the stories, issues and characters to life for the

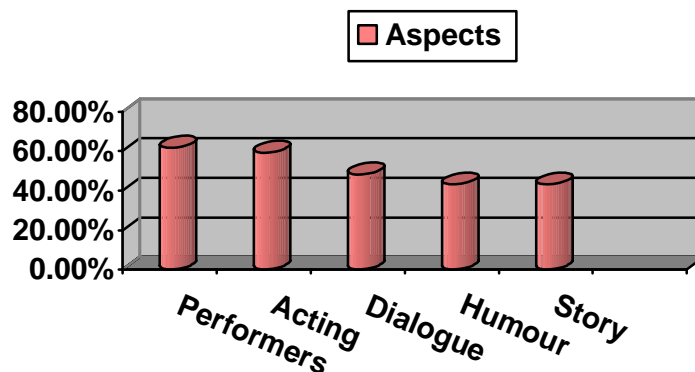
participants. The participants noted in discussion that the live nature of the acting and of the performers made the plays more absorbing and real.

GRAPH 5 - Best Aspects for Enjoyment



The most popular aspects in performance that assisted the participants' comprehension of all ten plays were: the performers, the acting, the dialogue, the humour, and the story (see Graph 6). The performers and the acting helped the participants to understand the story, the issues and the characters. The finding that the performers and their actions best helped the sample to enjoy and understand the plays demonstrated their very strong role in theatrical communication for new audiences. The same five aspects best assisted the sample to comprehend and enjoy all the plays. Other aspects such as set, lighting, costume, and sound/music appeared to have limited impact on enjoyment and understanding. This was partly due to the often simple staging of the plays due to the practicalities of state and national touring. However, it also pointed to the priorities in performance for new audiences with no background in attending plays.

GRAPH 6 – Best Aspects for Comprehension



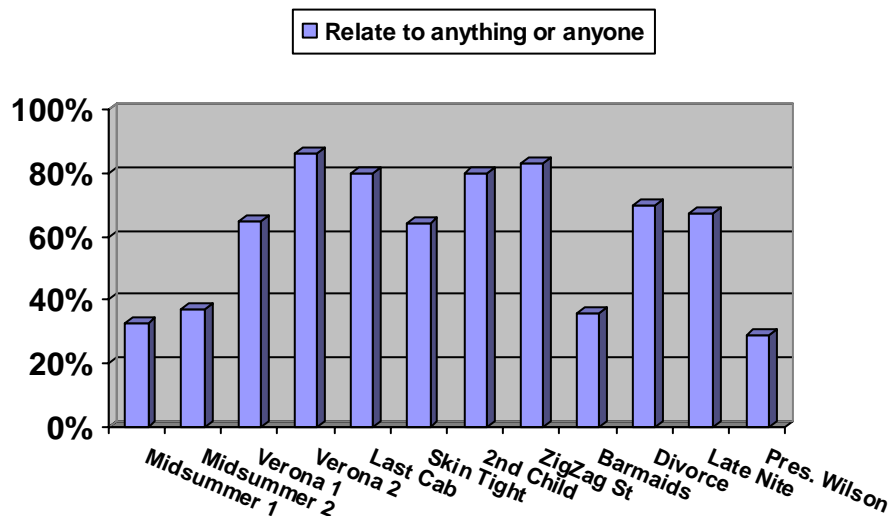
The participants were asked to indicate if they could relate to anyone or anything in the plays. On average across the sample and across all plays, 60% of the participants stated they could relate to something. This was an important finding for two central reasons. The majority of the participants had indicated in discussion that they believed that theatregoing was an elitist activity. They were concerned that they would not fit in with the other theatre patrons and that they would have difficulty engaging with the performances. The finding that almost two thirds of the sample could relate to aspects in the plays demonstrated that the plays were not created for one particular segment of the community. Instead, they provided insights, stories, and situations that a range of people could relate to.

Secondly, in most instances the aspects that the participants could relate to were not highlighted in the promotion of the plays. This finding indicated that there were missed opportunities for ticket sales because the theatre makers, promoters and PACs did not actively publicise things that many people were likely to relate to in the plays. By informing the public of these things there would be a greater chance of building expectation of the plays and interest in attendance. For example, the only occasion in the *Talking Theatre* project where publicity played a key role in generating expectation in the participants was for *Last Cab to Darwin*. This play about a dying man's journey to Darwin was performed at the Darwin Entertainment Centre (DEC). The play's plot related directly to Darwin, the issue of euthanasia was relevant and topical in Darwin, proponents of euthanasia (such as Dr Nitschke) lived in Darwin, and many of the characters in the play lived in the Northern Territory and other remote areas of Australia. These factors were perceived to be of direct relevance to the Darwin community and ensured that the local media willingly ran publicity about the forthcoming production of the play. As a consequence 73% of the *Talking Theatre* participants in Darwin had expectations of the play prior to attendance. This was the highest percentage of participant expectation for any of the plays in the *Talking Theatre* project. After experiencing *Last Cab to Darwin* 80% of the participants stated they could relate to the play and for most this was due to the many Darwin references and the characters that featured.

However, this sample average varied quite dramatically when the average percentages specific to the individual plays were examined (see Graph 7). It was found that there was a very high percentage of participants who could relate to *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2) (86%), *ZigZag Street* (83%), *Last Cab to Darwin* (80%), and *Second Childhood* (80%). There was also a considerably lower percentage of participants who could relate to something in *Barmaids* (36%), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1) (33%) and (2) (37%), and *President Wilson in Paris* (29%). Examination of the

aspects in performance that the participants could relate to, uncovered that characters and the relationships between characters in the plays were consistently cited across the sample. Few participants stated that they could relate these aspects in *Barmaids*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *President Wilson in Paris*. Thus, it appeared that new audiences were more likely to relate to plays that contained characters and relationships that were similar to those they experienced in their personal lives.

GRAPH 7 – Ability to Relate to the Plays



After the participants completed the *Tonight's Performance* questionnaire they talked together as a group about their reception of the play they had just experienced. The group discussions were facilitated by the researcher, however, the facilitator played a passive role to encourage the participants to direct the topics of discussion and to interact with each other rather than answer a series of posed questions. The unstructured, free-flowing, ultimately peer-led discussions generated substantial qualitative data that provided insight into the elements of performance and theatregoing that were important to new audiences. As part of the coding process of the data for analytic purposes, the participant comments were categorised as Positive, Negative, and Providing further detail about key aspects in the plays. It quickly emerged that similar aspects in performance were discussed across the sample and across the plays in the regions. These common group discussion points were in keeping with the popular individual responses given in the *Tonight's Performance* questionnaires. Therefore, the aspects in the plays that were regularly referred to by the sample pointed to the most important elements in performance for new audiences. The consistency of discussion topics demonstrated the unique experiences of non-theatregoers to plays.

Positives – What was enjoyed and why?

The most discussed aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about positively were: the performers and the acting, the humour, the aspects that could be related to, the sets, particular scenes or moments in the plays, and the story. Participants gave direct examples from the performances to help them to explain why they felt positively about these aspects. A short summary of participants' reactions from the post-performance discussions now follows.

The performers and the acting were mentioned many times in discussion because the participants were impressed with the skill and presence of the performers. Regular comments were made about the actors, such as they: could remember all of their lines, had good vocality, were expressive, had great comic timing, were physical and energetic, were highly professional, had excellent use of facial expression and body movement in relation to character, were great at doubling, helped to bring the story and characters to life, helped the audience to understand the story, were real and upclose, were believable, used direct address, and they appeared to enjoy themselves while acting.

Although not all of the plays were comedies, they did all contain comic elements or moments. The new audiences' penchant for humour ensured that this was an aspect that was discussed at some length. The types of comedy and examples of their presence in the plays were mentioned, such as black humour; casual, light-hearted humour; witty humour; controversial and/or topical humour. Specific performers and moments or scenes in performance were highlighted as fine examples of humour. For some the humour helped to 'take the edge off' shocking or depressing issues, while for others the humour was itself shocking.

As stated earlier, many of the participants were able to relate to aspects in the plays. It was common for them to share with each other the moments, characters, or issues in the plays that they could relate to their own experiences. The participants would explain that part of their enjoyment was to recognise characters as people that they knew in real life. Their ability to relate to aspects in the plays made them seem more realistic, accurate, believable, and thus more engaging. Particular scenes or moments in the plays that were significant to the participants were discussed after the performances. In particular, participants shared their reception of the times which were very funny, were moving, were identified with, were excellent examples of fine acting, or were key times when the message or issues of the plays were conveyed. The discussions also concerned particular

moments that were not understood and others within the group would explain their interpretations of the scenes.

Although many of the participants did not indicate in the *Tonight's Performance* questionnaire that the sets helped them to enjoy or understand the plays, this aspect was discussed regularly after viewing the performances. The participants appreciated the ways in which the sets portrayed locations, were used in multiple ways to indicate different places and things, and were changed by the cast/crew quickly and seamlessly in view of the audience. They also frequently spoke about the simplicity of the sets and the need to use imagination because of this. Through their symbolic design, the sets in some of the plays also informed the participants about the characters and their relationships with each other.

The stories presented in the plays were a common feature of the post-performance discussions. Participants would talk about how the stories related to real life, were fun, intriguing, or political. The structure would be discussed when the play contained a non-linear narrative or when a series of small, seemingly unrelated stories came together to make one large statement. Participants also spoke about the modern telling of old stories, and if they found the stories easy to understand. In some cases the stories were considered too simple, which made the plays less enjoyable.

Negatives – What was not enjoyed and why?

The most discussed aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about negatively were: the elements that made the plays difficult to understand; the slow moving, long and repetitive nature of some of the plays; the offensive content; and the comedy that was considered not to be funny. Again, the participants gave direct examples from the performances to help them to explain why they felt negatively about these aspects. A short summary of participants' reactions from the post-performance discussions now follows.

When participants had difficulty understanding what was going on in a play this became dissatisfying to them. They would use the time after the performance to share their dissatisfaction with the others and to ask them to explain the aspects that they could not understand. Mostly the difficulty some participants encountered concerned the language used in the plays. The Shakespearean plays were wordy, spoken quickly, and were in Old English which made it hard for some to comprehend what was being said. Other times, the language was not understood because the actors rushed the dialogue and their pronunciation was unclear, or because the participants were

seated a long way from the stage and could not hear what was said. Difficulty understanding also occurred due to the structure of the plays (such as non-linear narrative), the clash of modern and tradition (in the Shakespearean plays), the simple sets which offered few clues, and the confusing relationships between characters. Those participants who could not relate to anything in the plays also found it hard to comprehend what was going on.

Some of the plays (or moments within them) were considered to be slow moving, too long and repetitive. This made them seem boring, predictable, and tiring to some of the participants. The participants would mention moments or characters or plots that they thought 'dragged on'. Some explained that they were accustomed to faster-paced entertainment and they had to consciously wind down to try to suit the rhythm of the plays.

If participants were offended by something in the plays they would voice their concerns to their peers in the discussions. This would often lead to debate as not all participants were offended. Those who were offended expressed their disappointment, surprise, and disgust that the plays would publicly present that kind of content. Offensive content consisted of swearing, distasteful humour, sex scenes, and women objectified by wearing skimpy clothing.

Many of the plays were promoted as comedies and as such a significant number of the sample expected them to be funny. However, in some cases the jokes were not considered amusing and this diminished the participants' enjoyment. Individual taste dictated whether the plays were believed to be funny.

Key aspects discussed in detail - not necessarily positive or negative

The most discussed aspects of the plays that the sample spoke about in detail (not necessarily positively or negatively) were: the central issues or message of the plays; their expectations prior to attendance; recognition of actors, songs, storylines; other popular media that aspects in the plays reminded them of; the audience; and the promotion of the plays. Again, the participants gave direct examples from the performances to help them share their ideas with the others about these particular elements. A short summary of participants' reactions from the post-performance discussions now follows.

Central issues or the key message of the plays were raised by the participants in discussion. Issues such as adultery, domestic violence, euthanasia, IR reforms, Aboriginal rights, youth, love, and

respect for oneself were spoken about. The participants would usually relate these (and other subjects) to their personal experiences or beliefs.

The participants would note whether the plays met their expectations. In many cases the plays were more enjoyable than expected or were different to how they were anticipated. The sets were usually simpler, there were fewer actors, and the live nature of the performances was highly absorbing.

If the participants recognised from past experiences an actor or other aspects in performance, they would take pleasure in mentioning this to the others. Recognition added authority to their reception of the plays. It also added to their enjoyment of the performances. At times, elements in the plays reminded some of the participants of other art forms they had previously encountered, such as novels, television programmes, music, and films. This helped them to relate to the plays and also added extra meaning to the performance as they compared it with the original source with which they were more familiar.

The audience at the theatre was of interest to the participants as they observed the behaviours and appearances of theatregoers. The demographics of the audience, the interaction of the audience with each other and with the performers on stage, the level of engagement the audience had with the plays, and the enjoyment of being a part of a live audience were topics of discussion.

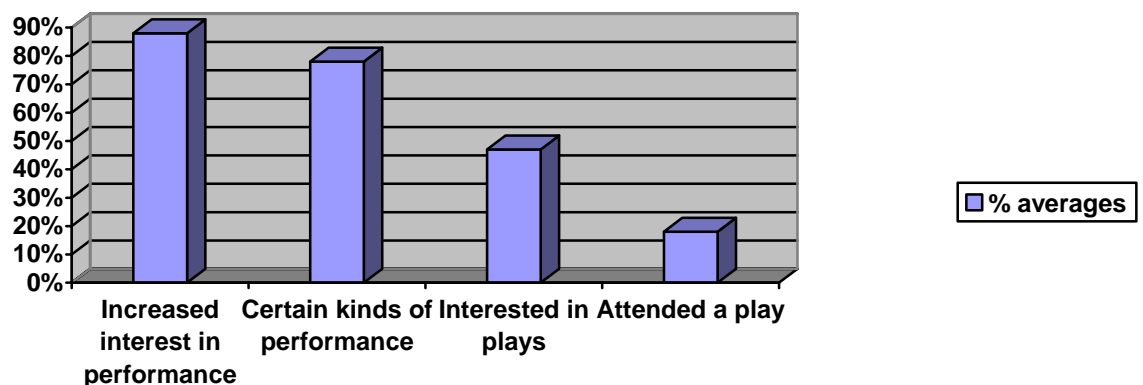
Much time was spent by all participants talking about the promotion of the plays. Participants discussed whether they had noticed any promotion, where they had noticed it, and the affect it had on their expectations. There was frustration that they could not find enough information about the plays prior to attendance. There were multiple suggestions of how the theatres could better promote the plays to the local community, which included specific direction about content, placement, and lead-time. After the performances the participants were in a position where they could indicate what aspects of the plays should have been publicised to encourage their attendance.

AFTER – Attitude and Future Attendance

A few weeks after attending the third performance in the *Talking Theatre* project, the participants completed (at home) the *Feedback* questionnaire. The average return rate across the sample was 53% of the total. The following average statistics are derived from the results of those 53% who completed the questionnaire (see Graph 8). Part of the questionnaire asked the participants to indicate if they had become more interested in live performance since their involvement in the research. Eighty-eight percent stated that they were now more interested in performance, and 78%

of these participants indicated that they were keen to attend particular kinds of performance in the future. For the three quarters of the sample who returned the questionnaire and stated they wished to see particular kinds of performances, 47% noted that they would like to attend plays. This was the most popular response across the sample, placing plays above other genres such as musicals, live music, and dance. This outcome demonstrated the participants' positive reception of the plays in the *Talking Theatre* project. After experiencing the plays there was an increase in the level of interest in future attendance. Of note was the finding that the desire to attend plays eclipsed the other more popular genres such as musicals, as was previously indicated in the results of the initial *About You* questionnaire and in the early post-performance group discussions. The combination of direct exposure to the plays as well as the time afterwards discussing them with their peers, ensured that this art form was more positively regarded after attendance than before.

GRAPH 8 – Average Percentages derived from 53% Questionnaire Returns



It was also found via the responses to the *Feedback* questionnaire, that during the year the respondents had participated in the research (either 2004 or 2005), 18% of the sample attended at least one play (at the local PAC or elsewhere) outside of study conditions. These participants were accompanied by a partner, friends or family. This finding further demonstrated the positive reception of the participants to the plays and to theatregoing as experienced in the *Talking Theatre* project. The significant levels of enjoyment and comprehension of the plays, combined with the willingness to attend other plays now and into the future, will impact on the PACs involved in the research. In the past, all of the participating PACs have had difficulty selling tickets to plays. The limited box office sales meant that many of the PACs were planning to reduce the number of plays they presented during their annual season of performances. Some were considering removing all plays from the repertoire and replacing them with more popular types of performance. The finding

that the new audiences enjoyed the plays and were keen to attend more plays in the future went against the trend to which the PACs had become accustomed.

The participant responses given immediately after engaging with the plays pointed to at least one of the key reasons why plays did not traditionally sell well in the regions. For people who do not normally attend the theatre and do not have substantial knowledge about plays and theatregoing, there is not a lot of information readily available about upcoming plays to increase their interest and expectations. According to the sample, most were aware the plays were on but knew very little else about them. Upon attending the plays in the *Talking Theatre* project, the majority found that they really enjoyed the plays and had little trouble understanding them. They were able to communicate their reception of the plays and their experiences of going to the theatre. Yet in most cases, they did not observe this kind of information in the local media and other outlets prior to their attendance. These particulars would have provided the insight for new audiences to anticipate what to expect from the plays and would have helped to encourage their patronage. Therefore, undertaking reception studies of theatre audiences not only generates data to understand how people reacted to performance, but provides clues as to how best to promote upcoming plays to entice future audiences.

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