

Review

Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow & Katya Johanson (eds.), *The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2013. Pp. 183. £45.00 hbk. ISBN: 978-1-841-50713-2.

This book represents a substantial achievement, by bringing together a number of authors interested in investigating how audiences experience live performance. As the editors acknowledge (pp. *xiii-xviii*) this is still relatively rare. While performing arts organizations are increasingly confident in their ability to discuss audiences in terms of demographics, there remains a sizeable gap in their facility to understand what people actually get out of cultural encounters.

Like the themed section on theatre audiences in this very edition of *Participations* (Vol. 12, Iss. 1), *The Audience Experience* proposes that the time has come for a new kind of audience research. One that asks the question: ‘what are audiences thinking, feeling and doing as a product of their engagement with arts practices?’ (p. *xiv*).

In *The Audience Experience* there is a deliberate openness in what ‘performance’ means, with various chapters touching on forms such as theatre, opera, dance, and music. So too does the nature of ‘liveness’ itself come into question: most prominently in Martin Barker’s chapter “‘Live at a Cinema Near You’: How Audiences Respond to Digital Streaming of the Arts’ (pp. 15-34). As Barker points out, the rising popularity of ‘Alternative Content’ – in which cultural events are live-streamed into cinemas – presents a particular challenge to contemporary debates around what we define as ‘live’. Barker finds that ‘liveness’ as experienced by real audience members can be considered to operate on at least seven different planes: from more commonly-discussed aspects such as embodied co-presence and temporal simultaneity, to a sense of communal inter-audience participation, to an awareness of the absence of an intervening mediatized hand. Despite being situated in a different physical location to the performers, many of Barker’s respondents nonetheless articulated feelings of intensified engagement commonly claimed as unique to ‘properly’ live performance.

Meanwhile, the other chapters predominantly focus on what audiences think and feel about cultural co-presence: both in terms of *being there together* in a particular venue, and of sharing a (non-digital) space with performers. However, importantly, in doing so the definition of ‘audience’ is itself complexified, not limited simply to those who participate

often and unprompted. One of the major achievements of this collection is the attempt made by contributors to investigate what might stand in the way of participation for those who do not usually take part.

For example, in 'In the Context of Their Lives: How Audience Members Make Sense of Performing Arts Experiences' (pp. 67-82) Lois Foreman-Wernet and Brenda Dervin show how, while respondents might talk about cultural experiences in terms of themes like 'truth/beauty', 'self-expression' and 'cognitive/intellectual growth' *after* the choice to participate has been made and carried out, beforehand the arts are 'routinely cast with negative associations such as "not cool" or "elitist"' (p. 79) by those who rarely attend. Jennifer Radbourne's chapter 'Converging with Audiences' (pp. 143-158) similarly shows how participants often express wariness of cultural activities because of the worry that they might not enjoy or understand them. Both chapters use the term 'pleasantly surprised' (Foreman-Wernet *et al.* p.79; Radbourne p. 151) to describe how persuading people to take part in arts experiences can produce revelatory feelings of enjoyment, along with disappointment about not having participated sooner.

It is here that this book might perhaps prove to be of particular practical benefit to arts organizations, by unpacking some of the potential barriers to participation encountered by audiences. This is not to suggest that participation is unproblematically equated with empowerment: in fact, the common urge to conflate these two things is confronted by one of the book's editors directly (Glow, p. 46). Nonetheless, one of the major advantages of this collection as a whole is the range of approaches it describes, firstly, to understand these barriers, and secondly to begin to minimize them.

In her chapter 'Challenging Cultural Authority: A Case-Study in Participative Audience Engagement' (pp. 35-48), Hilary Glow explains how Theatre Royal Stratford East's 'Open Stage' project recruited a number of 'co-programmer' volunteers. Through this network of intermediaries the company attempted to shift the weight of cultural authority from itself on to the local community, by asking people to speak about their encounters with the organization as well as what they'd like to see performed.

This finds echoes in Lisa Baxter, Daragh O'Reilly and Elizabeth Carnegie's 'Innovative Methods of Inquiry into Arts Engagement' (pp. 113-128), and also with Alan Brown's chapter 'All the World's a Stage: Venues and Settings, and Their Role in Shaping Patterns of Arts Participation' (pp. 49-66). While Baxter *et al.* provide a significant exploration of how people can be encouraged to build relationships with arts organizations by referring to four separate case-studies (BALTIC, Lyric Online, Watford Palace Theatre, and The Brindley), Brown explores how people attach values specifically to cultural sites. Asking what role settings play in shaping audiences' expectations and inclinations, Brown concludes that venues can usefully consider how people might be offered greater 'sovereignty' over the use of their spaces, concluding that static experiences have become problematic in our increasingly pick-and-choose-oriented age.

Another valuable outcome of the research assembled here is therefore its collective provocation to consider how feelings of 'ownership' can usefully be promoted in audiences.

Whether that means ownership over venues, companies, individual projects, or even over their own responses, the chapters uncover how participants often exhibit ‘a need to belong, to feel welcome’, to ‘own’ outputs and ‘inhabit’ buildings (Baxter *et al.* p. 121). The varying chapters show how this can be achieved in a number of ways, from improving facilities (e.g. Brown) to recruiting advocates (e.g. Glow), to persuading people to reflect on and share their experiences with others. In this way the act of research becomes more than just a device for gathering data to inform audience development strategies, with the research process itself actually helping to boost participants’ enjoyment. This idea is addressed in the chapter ‘The Longer Experience: Theatre for Young Audiences and Enhancing Engagement’ (pp. 95-111) by Matthew Reason. In exploring the negative reactions of a group of young people to a much-praised dance performance Reason shows how benefits can be gained from professional facilitation of the post-performance experience. Importantly, though, this does not mean ‘training’ people to be ‘better’ audiences, but rather providing them with the opportunities and skills to thoroughly work through their thoughts and feelings after the event’s conclusion.

It is worth pointing out here that *The Audience Experience* investigates more than audience resistance. By measuring people’s continuous responses, Kim Vincs’ ‘Structure and Aesthetics in Audience Responses to Dance’ (pp. 129-142) explores how highly invested audience members perceive their own changes in engagement, seeking to isolate moments of high intensity, or ‘gem moments’, within dance. Also, in ‘Amateurs as Audiences: Reciprocal Relationships between Playing and Listening to Music’ (pp. 83-93) Stephanie Pitts asks a specific question: how does playing an instrument – past or present – influence people’s live music engagements? Pitts concludes that the relationship between playing and listening is more complicated than might be imagined: while in some ways musical expertise can enhance the listening experience, this also has the potential to get in the way of audiences’ pleasure in the embodied experience.

Finally, the survey of research methods provided by Katya Johanson in ‘Listening to the Audience: Methods for a New Era of Audience Research’ (pp. 159-171) offers a helpful conclusion. Rather than attempting to rank different approaches as ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than others, Johanson uses this opportunity to consider the kinds of knowledge that each methodology is able to produce. And indeed, one of the genuine pleasures of this collection as a whole is seeing the different approaches in action. Whether responses are gathered by more traditional questionnaires, interviews and focus groups, or via ‘visual arts workshops’ (Reason), or through guided visualization, timelines, and metaphor elicitation (Baxter *et al.*), the varying projects described here indicate that we have indeed reached an ‘exciting time for audience research’ (Johanson p. 170).

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