

Be reasonable! On institutions, values, voices

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The articles in this section all present some kind of challenge to ‘common-sense’ ideas about how people find value in theatre, and what constitutes acceptable modes of audience behaviour and response. In doing so these authors collectively reconsider the nature of theatrical institutions, as well as what it means to see theatre *as* an institution.

In my own research into the inaugural season of National Theatre Wales I found that audience members who did not see themselves as theatre ‘experts’ often hesitated to criticise the work, feeling that perhaps they were not the ‘right’ kind of person to judge (Sedgman, forthcoming). Similar issues are addressed here, whether the focus is on disabled audiences (Hadley), or performance for young people (Richardson; Schuitema), or how ‘traditional’ audiences feel about the act of attending the theatre (Pasquier; Wilkinson). All these articles in some way investigate what it means to feel that one *is* or *is not* the ‘right’ audience, exploring questions from why people are more likely to share positive thoughts about cultural experiences (Johanson & Glow), to how talking about theatre can beneficially improve audiences’ confidence in their own response (Lindelof & Hansen). To read across the articles in this section is therefore to gain a sense of the complex tensions that surround how people find and articulate value in theatrical events. This involves a collective attempt to investigate what people feel they can reasonably *do* as part of theatre audiences, as well as what they can reasonably *say* about the theatre-going experience.

This introduction begins by considering how discourses of reasonableness are often deployed to implicitly encourage certain audience members to participate and speak, while others are effectively excluded and silenced. In doing so I hope to uncover something of the shifting relationships between the three words in the title: institutions, values, and voices. To illustrate this with a particularly concentrated example it is worth briefly looking outside the theatrical environment: at the UK’s most recent breastfeeding-in-public debate.

In December 2014, a woman tweeted from Claridge’s restaurant in London that staff had asked her to cover up her feeding baby. This became a front-page political issue when Nigel Farage, leader of the controversial right-wing party UKIP, suggested that ‘it isn’t too difficult to breastfeed a baby in a way that’s not openly ostentatious’. The subsequent row

was fierce and multifaceted, veering from derision leveled at antiquated ‘kippers’ (an unflattering nickname for Farage’s supporters), to diatribes about how imagined feminists feed in deliberately provocative ways, to complaints about liberal media misrepresentation of the radical right. For my purposes, though, the most interesting aspect was the divergence in ideas about what it means to be ‘reasonably’ discreet.¹ Facing the wall? Retiring to the lavatory? Proffering one breast at a time rather than taking out both simultaneously? The problem is that while ‘reasonableness’ is made of extremely woolly stuff, its boundaries mutable, it nonetheless tends to be presented as so obvious it is not worth spelling out. In the context of breastfeeding, the belief that women should be tolerably respectful to others was, in Farage’s words, ‘just a matter of common sense’. In establishing the figure of the ‘reasonable woman’ it therefore became possible for anyone with an alternative definition to be marked out as either unwittingly or deliberately perverse. In other words, to lift one’s voice in opposition was to become *unreasonable*. This raises the further question of who gets to define what counts as reasonable, and what not?

This is by no means the only example. In fact, ‘reasonable standards’ form the backbone of much of Western law (Lee 2012). For instance, Nancy S. Ehrenreich describes how sexual discrimination cases rely on ‘objective justification’, with offenders’ actions judged against a model of ‘reasonably’ offensive behaviour. While the objective test is often assumed to be ‘an accurate reflection of societal norms’, this has actually been exposed as ‘a mechanism for facilitating the coercive exercise of social power’ that reflects ‘the values and assumptions of a narrow elite’ (1990, 1178). The symbolic ‘reasonable person’ actually ‘explicitly sets up middle-class, male values as the source of the “objective” standard’ (*ibid*, 1213).

To consider these ideas in the context of culture is to step on particularly slippery ground, with most of the terms used in the quotes above – assumptions, coercion, elite – coming heavily loaded with conceptual baggage. However, not to examine this territory is to leave institutionalised value judgments unchallenged, as if they were indeed objective, reasonable, and simply the way things are. And it is into these areas that the seven articles in this section all delve, as they uncover the ways similar kinds of pressures can form at the juncture between theatrical institutions and their audiences.

This comes acutely into view in Bree Hadley’s paper ‘Participation, Politics and Provocations: People with Disabilities as Non-Conciliatory Audiences’. By drawing on examples such as Ju Gosling’s *The Letter Writing Project* (2009-14) Hadley presents a significant challenge to the figure of the ‘good cripple’, who ‘simply accepts what accommodations are offered to avoid becoming burdensome’ (163). Calling instead for a ‘non-conciliatory’ approach to disabled spectatorship, her paper advocates a refusal of what is commonly understood to constitute suitable disability-access adjustments. By making visible the inhibiting effects of normative discourse Hadley raises important questions about the links between assertions of ‘reasonableness’ and dominant social structures.

Here it is useful to refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work *Distinction*, which similarly exposes the way the ‘practical knowledge of the social world that is presupposed

by “reasonable” behaviour’ is underpinned by ‘internalized, “embodied” social structures’. The result is the production of ‘a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world’, which functions ‘below the level of consciousness’ (1984, 468). This idea takes a particularly concrete form in Hadley’s description of the ‘blank look’ given by theatre attendants to disabled people, whose presence often requires them to act beyond normalised practices (158). This is a situated example of how collective assumptions are often unreflexively internalized, so that people who might wish to voice alternative perspectives are either forced into the role of socially-incorrect dissidents, or alternatively silenced altogether. In this way, Hadley puts forward a compelling argument that efforts to provide disabled audience members with *logistical* (practical, physical) access can effectively paper over the fact that other levels of access (social, symbolic, aesthetic) simply are not being addressed at all.

Indeed, the extent to which disabled audiences are offered certain kinds of access is currently under consideration elsewhere. A number of influential publications have recently shone a spotlight on the UK creative industry’s under-representation of women, Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people, disabled individuals, and low-income groups (e.g. see Parkinson & Buttrick 2014; DCMS 2014). The audiences quoted in this section often reflect on how the ‘stark reality’ for many is ‘that the possibility to express oneself artistically and creatively at a professional level’ – as well as the chance to see oneself so expressed – is still being ‘curtailed [...] to an unacceptable degree’ (Warwick Commission 2015, 35).

One of the other important things this section achieves is to consider the complexities involved in broadening theatrical representation. It is not enough to simply put diverse perspectives onstage: attention must also be paid to *how* these perspectives are represented, as well as how they are received by audiences. This is considered by Hadley, who explains that when characters – and, even more rarely, performers – with disabilities do appear onstage they are often used to represent an ideological construct rather than a ‘real’ person. Offering an interesting counterpoint, Karian Schuitema’s paper ‘A Provocation: Researching the diverse child audience in the UK’ gives a useful overview of diversity in theatre for young people. Schuitema argues that on the whole young people’s voices are denied an outlet, with theatre designed for children tending to present a version of diversity constructed from the perspective of the adult and therefore not necessarily succeeding in representing how children themselves actually view the world.

Both Hadley and Schuitema deal with absence, with Hadley exploring how disabled audiences and performers are all-too-often entirely absent from the cultural event itself. Meanwhile, although Schuitema’s ‘absent child’ is expected to be present in the auditorium this is as a ‘captive’ audience, so-called ‘because of their limited freedom’ in choosing whether or not, as well as *what*, to attend (174). Young audiences, brought in by the busload or corralled in school halls, should literally be seen but not heard. Schuitema’s paper shows how, aside from a handful of influential studies,² relatively little effort has been made either to call on children to play a role in the production process or to listen to their reflections on their theatre-going.

Listening to young audiences, and taking their voices seriously, is something that John Richardson achieves in his paper 'Live Theatre in the Age of Digital Technology'. Drawing on a two-year study of school students' responses to a series of theatre productions, Richardson finds that young people's live viewing practices are informed by their day-to-day immersion in digital environments. What his respondents tend to value about the theatre-going experience is the sense that – unlike surfing the internet, for example – in spending time like this, something has been *achieved*. Particularly interesting is how audiences tend not to specify what such 'achievements' actually involve. Rather, there is an overall air of common-sense to the idea that to attend the theatre is to have done something meaningful.

Also valuable is Richardson's review of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. While he raises thoughtful concerns about the limits of this theory, habitus proves a useful way of examining how teenagers' relationships with their smartphones are socially inscribed, situated in the body, with the practice of checking messages often an unreflexive tic. Richardson's audiences articulate a conflict between obligations of politeness generated through physical proximity to performers, and the deep-seated itch to stay in contact with the (virtual) world. An awareness of theatre-going etiquette therefore plays an important part in how these young audiences reflect on the performance event.

Here it is useful to consider John Holden's observation that while the notion of 'the public' might seek to stand for all of us, in fact of course it never can. 'Everyone is now in a minority group, so we need to understand that the public has multiple identities and many voices, not just one' (2006, 21). However, as these three papers – Hadley's, Schuitema's, and Richardson's – demonstrate, while conceptually this might be the case, in actuality certain kinds of 'minorities' are more significantly discriminated against than others. The audiences discussed in these papers are all socially and/or bodily marked as different to the 'unmarked' mainstream audience; as a result of which, as all three authors persuasively argue, they are also audiences who often engage with cultural productions that they feel are not quite *for them*. Hadley's paper shows how addressing the 'needs' of disabled audiences can discourage people from asking for their 'interests' and 'wishes' to be considered, 'as if only a bitter cripple, bludger or malingerer would want to burden fellow spectators with requests for more' (160); while one of Richardson's respondents consciously reflects on the sense of 'feel[ing] nervous when going to a live theatre because I feel like I don't belong there' (198). Moreover, Schuitema's paper puts forward a compelling case that paradoxically this can often be true even in those performances made *especially for* young audiences, with adult practitioners often failing to 'invite the child's perspective on *their* theatre and *their* diverse world' (173).

For the most part the remaining four papers in this section discuss the responses of people who might be considered part of a 'mainstream' (or 'unmarked') theatre audience. However, they nonetheless address similar questions about how audiences' encounters with performative events are steeped in an awareness of appropriate ('reasonable') behaviour. As Baz Kershaw points out, in terms of implicit rules of engagement, 'theatre

offers what must be one of the most exacting producer-consumer contracts of all' (1994, 164), with the contributions in this section all making a collective effort to show how audiences' responses are often shaped by how they feel they *should* respond.

Dominique Pasquier specifically explores this contract in her article 'The Cacophony of Failure', explaining how the gradual 'domestication of the audience's bodies' (206) was the result of a collaborative effort by the cultural elite to train disruptive audiences in appropriate conduct. Through a series of interviews conducted with theatre-goers in France, Pasquier's study sets out to identify how audience members feel about the constraints that are tacitly placed on their behaviour during traditional theatrical performances. This identifies what she terms 'an ethic of self-control' (213), with audiences almost always willing to play along with agreed behavioural norms even when they have personally disconnected from the onstage action. One of the most valuable outcomes of this research is Pasquier's identification of implicitly acceptable strategies for managing tensions between politeness and disengagement. She describes a tendency to find enjoyment in the ritual aspects of theatre, explaining that very often her audiences *like* feeling their behaviour to be restrained. For Pasquier's audiences, there are signs that the rules of engagement are not seen in terms of a loss of freedom (i.e. the removal of their liberty to act) but as a gain, with theatre offering them freedom from distractions. This was also reflected in Richardson's findings: while his young people sometimes saw theatre as boring compared to the fast-paced world of technology, others talked specifically about valuing live performance because it forced them to pay attention – to move at the speed of the production – by disallowing the option of switching over to something more instantly rewarding. In both articles audiences talk about the need to remain respectful to performers, with this often going hand-in-hand with shared pleasure at being in on the rules of the game. What these articles show is how audiences often find gratification in the sense that they know how they are supposed to act.

Reading between the contributions, this same feeling comes into view in many of the papers where the 'fit' between theatre and audience is a good one. Where the fit is uncomfortable or uneasy, however, cracks start to show. An excellent example of this comes from Katya Johanson and Hilary Glow's paper 'A Virtuous Circle: The Positive Evaluation Phenomenon in Arts Audience Research'. Drawing on a fascinating case-study, Johanson and Glow explore the enthusiastic responses of a focus group of predominantly white audience members to an Australian cabaret production featuring contemporary Indigenous performers. In the exceedingly positive comments gathered, Johanson and Glow find evidence of satisfaction coming from participants' sense of ownership over the material, feeling that this performance had been 'entirely accessible [...] and arguably made for them' (248). They contrast this with a powerful account by David Osa Amadasun of how his own daughter physically balked on entering London's Hayward Gallery, because of the sense that this cultural space was literally not for her.

This resonates with Julie Wilkinson's article 'Dissatisfied Ghosts: Theatre Spectatorship and the Production of Cultural Value'. Drawing on the findings of two

interrelated projects exploring audiences' memories of live events, Wilkinson found that the low frequency of ethnic or racial diversity in the sample of shows investigated, as well as the relative lack of female representation, went seemingly unnoticed by research participants. Largely surveying the responses of people familiar with theatrical attendance (with many contributors introduced early to live performance by a parent), this article shows how people often normalize such elisions to the extent that they fail to register them at all. In a particularly persuasive passage Wilkinson talks about the forceful potency of 'tramlines of collective memory', with audiences' responses negotiated against 'sets of unspoken but shared cultural values, with powerful emotional and social significance' (140).

Finally, in 'Talking About Theatre: Audience Development Through Dialogue', Anja Mølle Lindelof and Louise Ejgod Hansen argue that arts institutions can run 'Theatre Talks' events to effectively *enhance* the fit between audiences and theatre. By offering a space for attendees to share their perspectives on the material and to learn from the experiences of others, Lindelof and Hansen show how Theatre Talks can help audiences less familiar with theatre to gain confidence in their own participation. Through such methods, the act of encouraging participants to engage in post-show discussions can be beneficially deployed as part of audience development strategies. This thought-provoking conclusion is usefully counterbalanced by other articles in this section, with Johanson and Glow in particular cautioning us to consider the way our own research processes might conspire to reproduce existing structures (the 'virtuous circle' of their article's title). While the papers collected here convincingly demonstrate the value of encouraging audiences to talk about their experiences, they also advise that attention must also be paid to *whose* voices are heard as part of this process, as well as to what people feel they are able to say.

This returns us to the title of this sub-section: 'Institutions, Values, Voices'. While in introducing the articles collected here I have spoken at length about how audiences' *voices* can be either encouraged or stifled, I have been deliberately loose in my use of the terms *institution* and *value*. It is now worth considering what it means to use these words in relation to live events.

Baz Kershaw draws a distinction between theatre and performance. Here, theatre is seen as inseparable from institution to such an extent that it actually becomes 'theatre-as-institution', while performance is 'performance-as-event'. Kershaw clarifies: 'By "theatre" I mean the institutions, buildings, modes of production that are required to stage a performance. By "performance" I mean the live event itself' (1994, 163). Patrice Pavis similarly sees theatre as an institutional practice, indelibly marked by social forces and the sum of all the 'influences of other theatres past and present' (2003, 61). Indeed, in his famous questionnaire structuring theatrical analysis, Pavis assumes that audiences' expectations and responses are especially strongly influenced by their awareness of situated institutions. In the section on the Spectator, the very first question is: 'within what theatrical institution does the production take place?'; the second: 'what were your expectations of performance?' (*ibid*, 93). When Pavis and Kershaw talk about theatrical institutions they usefully encourage us to consider how people relate to *theatres*, with both arts venues and

theatre companies coming encumbered with values: with sets of ‘tradition’ or ‘reputation’ that will necessarily inform audiences’ expectations, as well as particular spatial considerations, social relationships and stored-up histories. Audiences’ responses to acts of performance must be considered in light of all these wider concerns, we are reminded here. But in thinking about institutions it is also important to consider the very *idea* of ‘theatre’ itself, in all its different forms. What does it mean to find value in live performance, and how is this made meaningful in people’s lives?

Asking similar kinds of questions, a number of big projects within the UK are just now beginning to bear fruit. Endeavours such as the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Cultural Value Project (of which the research described in Julie Wilkinson’s paper is one notable strand) and the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value have been working to further our understanding of how cultural value operates, by cracking open the division between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘instrumental’ worth. This distinction has been discussed at length elsewhere (with a particularly useful review provided by Carnwath & Brown 2014), so I will not delve too deeply into the literature now. But it is interesting here to note John Holden’s introduction of a third kind – institutional value – which he places in a triangular relationship with instrumental and intrinsic. For Holden, institutional value

relates to the processes and techniques that organisations adopt in how they work to create value for the public. Institutional value is created (or destroyed) by how these organisations engage with their public; it flows from their working practices and attitudes. (2006, 17)

The problem with this is that it overly individualises institutions, by suggesting that discrete organisations have full liberty to become ‘active agents in the creation or destruction of what the public values’ (*ibid*, 18). However, what the articles in this section collectively demonstrate is the way that cultural organisations, spaces and forms *come with collective baggage*. This is not to deny institutions agency – indeed, as Pasquier’s paper shows, some theatres can develop a ‘reputation’ for allowing unruly audience behaviour – but simply to point out that individual organisations, whether newly formed or decades old, are never completely unfettered from context. Rather, they are stitched into a wider tapestry, with audiences’ theatrical encounters caught up in complex relationships with the policies and practices of specific located organisations and the broader landscape of socially-constructed value systems. One of the important outcomes of this themed section as a whole is the dedicated effort made by all our authors to consider the interplay between ‘theatre-as-institution’ and ‘performance-as-event’, collectively offering a broad survey of how actual differentiated audience members respond to the second in light of the first. Here, encounters with particular moments of performance are shaped in incredibly intricate ways by situated institutions, but also by the weight of theatre-going as a cultural activity.

Throughout this introduction I have touched on ideas of legitimacy: of how ‘common-sense’ notions of behaviour are often internalized, embedded in social structures,

and so can promote or inhibit certain kinds of responses. This is implicitly a question of power. In fact, an alternative title for this section might have been ‘Institutions, Values, Power’. I want to conclude by briefly thinking through my own resistance to using this loaded term. This was partly down to the way that power has been the subject of a great many competing theories, so it seemed unwise to use this term without fully justifying the *kinds* of power in operation: a task that is much larger than this introduction can satisfactorily accommodate. But also, while the recent cultural value literature has been happy to talk about the need to ‘empower’ audiences (about which a useful discussion can be found in this themed section, in Matthew Reason’s introduction ‘*Participations on Participation*’), there seems to be a general wariness of considering in detail where that power might be located. In other words, if audiences are disempowered, then who actually has the power to empower them?³

In many of the associated debates it is possible to trace a sequence of finger pointing. For institutions bitterly licking their wounds after funding cuts it is primarily the government who has the power: they hold the purse strings of public money. But governments often suggest that they would love to give more to the arts, if only that were possible when money is much needed elsewhere. For instance, see the impassioned personal essay by Tessa Jowell (the UK’s previous Labour Culture Secretary), who bemoaned having to ‘apologise’ for cultural investments by defending them in instrumental terms alone (2004, 8). The same thing came later on from Jowell’s Conservative successor Maria Miller, who argued that despite personally believing ‘unequivocally’ in the importance of culture ‘that is never going to be the argument that wins the day when money is desperately tight. So, this is the time to focus on the economic impact’ (2013, *np*). As John Holden pointed out, ‘[e]xactly who – HM Treasury? the media? self-censorship? – is forcing politicians to debate culture in this reductive way is an interesting question’ (2006, 34). But in the run-up to the May 2015 general election the common political perception seemed to be that public response to an arts budget increase would be predominantly negative, with Labour criticized for ‘boasting’ via Twitter that they would not reverse funding cuts (Mason 2015, *np*). By this rationale, the public is positioned as having power: firstly because they can vote; and secondly because, public funding aside, people can always support the arts themselves and thereby vote from their pockets.⁴

The problem with this lies in the suggestion that power is fundamentally about money. While the relationship between culture and economics is undoubtedly important, this is only part of the picture. As the articles in this section show, what is actually at stake for audiences is a series of multiple shifting relationships, with arts organisations often experienced as powerful independently of the pecuniary. For example, Johanson and Glow’s discussion of Amadasun’s ‘mundane violence of cultural value’ (240) offers valuable insights into the embodied resistance experienced when some audience members access certain cultural spaces. While places like art galleries might be *financially* free to enter, these are not always free of psychological or emotional *risk*. We might therefore usefully return to Bourdieu and his analysis of power as no longer embodied in specialised persons or

institutions. Instead this is dispersed, 'realized and manifested only through a whole set of fields linked by organic solidarity' (2000, 102). This is what he calls 'circuits of legitimation', with power

exercised, invisibly and anonymously, through the actions and reactions, apparently anarchic but in fact structurally constrained, of agents and institutions located in fields that are at once competitive and complementary [...] and engaged in circuits of legitimating exchanges which are ever longer and more complex and therefore symbolically ever more effective, but which also make ever more room, potentially at least, for conflicts. (*ibid*)

Indeed, from Wilkinson's unnoticed elisions, to the 'blank look' described by Hadley, to Johanson and Glow's 'virtuous circle', the articles collected here demonstrate how power is not exercised coercively, or even for the most part consciously, but functions on every level at the nexus between institutions, arts practices and audiences. For this is what empirical research can achieve, by accessing the voices of real, differentiated audience members as they work through their reactions to specific performance encounters. And in considering what might legitimately be done, thought or said, and in calling where necessary for *unreasonable* audiences, our contributors have begun to unveil the hidden structural constraints that underpin our seemingly 'common-sense' world.

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Notes:

¹ While Farage himself did not use the word 'reasonable', it was striking how often this term was utilised by commentators. To offer just a small sample, taken from comments to online articles: '[E]ven if one thinks they need to do it in a public place, it is only reasonable to ask them to find a private spot to do it' (*Huffington Post*, 5th Dec 2014); 'It is reasonable to expect discretion in all behaviour' (DS Forums, 5th Dec 2014); 'The beauty of the moment between mother and infant is about the attachment between them and is stands to reason that this is best achieved without an audience' (*Telegraph*, 5th Dec 2014).

² By authors such as Matthew Reason, John Tulloch, Jeanne Klein and Shifra Schonmann, to name only a few.

³ For example, the recent report 'Equality and Diversity Within the Arts and Cultural Sector in England' sets out to investigate the 'interrelated, socio-economic, educational and geographic reasons' for the ongoing disparities 'in the level of arts and cultural opportunities and engagement'. Although it discusses the link between 'lower socio-economic groups' and 'lack of exposure' to 'legitimate' culture, the authors specifically confront the question of power only in a footnote, when they acknowledge that this document *doesn't* directly address power, but that a forthcoming project will (Parkinson et al. 2014, 71).

⁴ See for instance the recent statement by Bernard Donoghue, Director of the UK's Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA), who said that the rise in membership and Friends schemes indicates 'that the Brits are voting [...] with their feet and wallets' (ALVA 2015, np).