Resisting radical ideologies, one play at a time: A mixed-methods study of audience responses to Ideologically Challenging Entertainment

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Summary:
This paper presents a mixed-methods approach to audience response research conducted as part of a broader study on the development and efficacy of Ideologically Challenging Entertainment (ICE). The study included the application of ICE principles to a theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* entitled *Two Merchants*. Audience responses to *Two Merchants* were evaluated through a study incorporating five different data collection methods including observation; a questionnaire; informal post-show discussions; interviews and focus groups. This was the first known attempt at this kind of informal post-show discussion as a data collection method. The data was analysed using an integrative mixed-methods approach, combining a range of analytic procedures to transfer between qualitative and quantitative modes. The integrative analysis proved to be exceptionally valuable, generating results with the breadth and depth of qualitative research and the statistical precision and large sample size of a quantitative study.

Keywords: Ideologically Challenging Entertainment; Integrative Mixed-Methods Analysis; Audience Response Research; Theatre for Development; Applied Theatre; *Two Merchants*; Data Collection Methods; Qualitative Methods; Quantitative Methods; The Arab-Israeli Conflict

Audience response and reception studies have become increasingly important to the examination of theatre and performance in general, and particularly performances aiming to inspire social or political change or action. In many cases, the artists involved in such productions accept that their performances will have a powerful impact on their audiences: for many theatre practitioners and academics, this is considered common knowledge. An

academic culture requires that such an impact needs to be quantifiably measured and demonstrated, and that audience responses to such performances be more critically documented. Given the benefits, it is not surprising that audience responses are becoming an increasingly frequent subject of study for academics and practitioners alike. Such studies, however, are often limited in their approaches. In fact, there is often significant prejudice against the use of certain methods in conducting such research, particularly regarding quantitative or survey based studies. This paper presents a mixed-methods approach to audience response research that integrates the quantitative and qualitative approaches throughout the planning, data collection and data analysis phases of the study. An integrative approach combines the strongest elements of both qualitative and quantitative methods. While many mixed methods studies contain qualitative and quantitative elements running in parallel or sequence, this approach applies both methods to the same data simultaneously, without prioritising either method. The result is a research design and analysis that is able to understand the depth and subtlety of a data set through qualitative analyses, while evaluating the prevalence of responses, their relationships to one another, and the degree to which they can be predicted by a given set of variables.

The analysis presented here was included as part of a broader study on the development and efficacy of Ideologically Challenging Entertainment (ICE) (Chalmers).[1] While a brief introduction to ICE is included in this paper, a full examination of ICE or the research conducted on its efficacy is beyond the scope of an article focused on research methodology.

ICE uses entertainment to present multiple perspectives on a conflict rather than a single, potentially polarizing view. ICE principles were first applied to a theatrical adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* entitled *Two Merchants*. Audience responses to *Two Merchants* were evaluated through the mixed-methods approach addressed in this article. In the early stages of this research, I encountered significant resistance from theatre practitioners and academics to the use of quantitative measures in addition to the qualitative techniques. Their objections were rooted in the perception that quantitative measures were too limiting; that theatre and audience responses to it were too complex and multi-faceted to be reduced into a series of percentages and likelihoods. While I agree that quantitative measures cannot provide a complete, holistic understanding of audience response, they do offer significant value when used in conjunction with qualitative measures. This paper outlines the ways in which the quantitative and qualitative approaches can be integrated to strengthen one-another and the study as a whole.

Ideologically Challenging Entertainment

The concept of entertainment challenging ideologies is hardly a new one. In fact, it could be argued that ideology has always been a part of entertainment – much as it is woven into many aspects of life. Similarly, theatrical genres with the express intention of challenging or addressing social and political problems are a common and established part of theatrical practice. ICE is both a part of and separate from these existing models. ICE differentiates

itself from other theatre containing ideological content in several ways, with two of the most obvious being the way in which ICE challenges ideologies and its emphasis on entertainment.

As with other forms of entertainment, ICE both incorporates ideological elements and resists, opposes and challenges them. ICE, however, is founded on the principle that in order to effectively challenge ideologies, one must present multiple aspects of them. While many ideologically charged performances choose to take a stand against, or for, a particular perspective (for example, Caryl Churchill's anti-Israeli production of *Seven Jewish Children* (Churchill 71)), ICE advocates presenting as many perspectives as possible, including those which one hopes to oppose. For example, rather than present only an anti-Israeli perspective, as Churchill chose to do, *Two Merchants*, in keeping with ICE principles, presented both pro- and anti-Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. Moreover, *Two Merchants* presented a spectrum of ideological attitudes on the Arab-Israeli conflict, not only a handful of extreme positions.

While it may seem counter-intuitive to present and even embrace the views one hopes to oppose, the technique has a firm grounding in both ethical practice and persuasion theory. One of the ethical concerns surrounding the use of highly persuasive media such as entertainment to present ideological views is the question of responsibility. Let us imagine that I have a firm belief that my view that 'Smurfs are evil' is right. I could easily create a persuasive production arguing that Smurfs, with their genocidal attitude towards Gargamel and their use of poisons, explosives and other violent, even torturous means to kill him, are criminal, evil and should be banned. Do I have the right to impose my view on an audience? Perhaps I even cultivate my view and one day, in the future, when I hold a position of power, I implement policies designed to not only eliminate Smurfs from production, but also punish those who are caught in possession of such inflammatory media. Given my position of power, I could even create an entire anti-Smurfs movement, using persuasive entertainment to convince people to not only support it, but to violently oppose those who do not. Would I be responsible for the violent anti-Smurf actions taken by those who watched my productions? Are those people responsible for their own actions? Did I have the right to use techniques I knew to be powerful mechanisms of persuasion to perpetuate this violent, and admittedly bizarre, ideology? In other words, where does one draw the line between socially relevant performances and propaganda? (No analogy is perfect, but in this case, the Smurfs analogy was selected precisely because it is somewhat ridiculous. I should note that I, and many others, love the Smurfs and have no objection to their violent opposition to Gargamel – although I worry about their treatment of his cat.)

Presenting multiple and even opposing perspectives on an issue is one way to address this ethical question. The concept of freedom of expression, and of choice, is based on exactly this philosophy. If every perspective can be heard and expressed, then audiences are, literally, free to choose their own views. While a single production cannot express every possible viewpoint, it can express more than one, embracing this freedom and challenging

audiences to make their own informed decisions. ICE, then, *challenges* ideologies through the presentation of multiple perspectives.

ICE, further, becomes a persuasive medium through its emphasis on *entertainment*. Every first year theatre student studies Brecht as the, perhaps archetypal, example of an artist developing theatre as a means of addressing challenging social issues. Brecht's emphasis on the need for persuasive theatre to appeal to the audience on a cognitive level are very similar to early persuasion theories which emphasised the value of central, cognitive routes to persuasion.

In psychology, sociology and marketing, one approach to the art and science of conveying a message to an audience with the intention of generating attitude change is 'persuasion theory'. Persuasion theories advocate three routes to attitude change: central, peripheral (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 135) and narrative (Green and Brock). The central route uses accurate information, or information that claims to be accurate, and logical arguments, to convince someone of the value of their idea. The peripheral route, on the other hand, uses various positive and negative 'cues' to influence attitude and behaviour change. The third route to persuasion is narrative persuasion: conveying persuasive messages within narrative forms. All three routes to persuasion can produce stable attitude change when applied in the appropriate ways. For central and peripheral persuasion, creating messages that are likely to generate significant 'elaboration' on the part of the audiences (stimulating message related arguments in favour of the message, among audiences) (Pierro et al. 103), or which require extensive processing on the part of audiences are likely to generate stable and persistent attitude change (Pierro et al. 110). Both central and peripheral routes to persuasion attempt to generate extensive processing and elaboration in favour of the message while limiting or eliminating any negative counterarguments that may undermine the persuasive impact of the message.

In the case of narrative persuasion, the mechanism for effective narrative persuasion is 'transportation', or immersion, a process that allows for the "melding of cognition and affect" (Green and Brock 719). Transportation is what theatre artists sometimes call the 'suspension of disbelief'; the willingness of an audience member to not only accept a fictional world but, in many cases, to be imaginatively transported into it. For the time in which we are involved with that imaginary universe, the real world fades and even disappears,(Green and Brock 702) including the elements of the 'real world' that may challenge the message in the narrative (Green and Brock 702).

Each of these routes to persuasion can be applied to the art of using theatre, performances and entertainment in general to affect social or political change. Brecht's alienation technique was based on the insightful belief that his arguments would have a deeper, longer lasting impact if they were central and cognitively based rather than peripheral and emotionally suggestive – as he perceived most theatre to be. Brecht's approach shares many similarities with early persuasion theories (and, in fact, predates them).

Rather than cultivating a relationship with his audience based on the suspension of disbelief (as realist theatre practitioners had in the past), Brecht focused his energies on ensuring that the relationship with the audience facilitated an intellectual connection between actors and audience which allowed them to work together to understand the social or political issue confronted in the play. Brecht's ideal theatre avoided emotional entanglements in his productions, actively seeking to break the empathetic bonds that occurred between audience and characters through a process sometimes known as distancing or 'alienation.' To over simplify a complex subject, the theatre Brecht hoped to create was one that used the central route to persuasion in order to stimulate cognitive engagement among audiences.

The focus on the cognitive engagement of the audience is implicit in many Theatre for Development (TfD) and Applied Theatre (AT) approaches, which often prioritise the 'message' and its accuracy or relevance to the audience over artistic or aesthetic interests. These genres have good reason for their emphasis on cognitive engagement, as the central route to persuasion does generate highly stable and persistent attitude changes.

What Brecht discovered in his experimentation with alienation, however, is that many Theatre audiences want and expect to be entertained, just as audiences encountering an advertisement expect to be exposed to a persuasive message. Brecht's attempts to modify the experience were frustrated when audiences insisted on responding to his exceptional plays by empathising with the characters and being transported into the stories. Brecht demonstrated what Plato described centuries ago in his 'allegory of the cave' (Plato 186-212) – that people will revert to the familiar – to their horizons of expectation, regardless of the oppositional forces at work. In theatre, the expectation is to be entertained, to be transported into another world. Theatre audiences not only allow this transportation, they often insist on it.

This kind of immersion or transportation, common in the strictly 'entertainment' focused media such as mainstream theatre, film, television and video games, can be an exceptionally persuasive way to convey messages to audiences through the third route to persuasion: narrative persuasion. Narrative persuasion creates highly stable and persistent attitude change (Appel and Richter "Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase over Time" 128) and operates by inviting audiences into the imaginary world of the story – a story which contains a persuasive message, but which prioritises the transportive value of the story. The imaginary 'world' of a transportive story can feel exceptionally real and can evoke both cognitive and emotional responses, with high emotional content often increasing the likelihood of the story being persuasive (Appel and Richter "Transportation and Need for Affect in Narrative Persuasion: A Mediated Moderation Model" 129). The illusion of a 'real' world created by a transportive story, combining its cognitive and emotional impulses can result in an almost experiential component to the process of narrative persuasion (Green and Brock 719). Experiential learning is one of the most efficient and enduring forms of attitude change and in imitating it, transportation capitalises on this type of influence (Green and Brock 702).

In addition, audience members who are transported into a fictional world are far less likely to generate counterarguments against any persuasive messages they encounter within that narrative as they have already accepted the truth of that world (Green and Brock 702). There is some indication that narratives may be particularly useful when the inclination to counterargue is strong, such as with messages involving controversial or ideological themes (Green 48). Recent studies suggest that narrative persuasion is likely to be a particularly effective method of challenging those attitudes that people are most unwilling to change (such as firmly held ideological or political beliefs) (Knowles and Linn 178-79).

ICE, as the name suggests, is an entertainment medium – one which embraces the transportive effects of narratives and the persuasive power they entail. The emphasis on entertainment is another distinguishing feature of ICE. Unlike many theatrical genres aimed at inspiring social change, ICE embraces traditional, mainstream entertainment approaches and, in fact, any approach which prioritises entertainment alongside ideological content. Moreover, ICE is not limited to theatre; it can be applied to any narrative-based medium including, but not limited to, theatre, film, television and video games.

While there are a multitude of genres which include ideological content, the main distinguishing features of ICE are the way in which it chooses to challenge ideologies – through the presentation of multiple and often opposing perspectives in a single production – and the emphasis on the entertainment value (on transportive narratives) of the production. Additionally, ICE is not strictly a theatrical genre – despite its initial testing focusing on theatre – but was designed to be applicable to any narrative, entertainment-based medium. Given these distinguishing features, ICE incorporates elements of a significant number of mainstream, TfD and AT approaches and exists as a parallel approach to achieving similar goals.

About *Two Merchants*

Two Merchants was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* designed to challenge some of the ideological underpinnings of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. The original script was abridged to the length of a one-act play (approximately one hour) and performed twice every night. Audiences watched both versions of the performance. The two versions of the play were interpreted differently based on a single variation in the socio-political structure of the play: in one version (known from this point on the Muslim Dominated World (MDW)), Shylock, Tuball and Jessica are Jews in a predominantly Arab or Muslim society (changed from the original in which the dominant culture is Christian). In the other version (the Jewish Dominated World (JDW)), the social structure was inverted, with Shylock, Tuball and Jessica becoming Muslim Arabs in a predominantly Jewish society. The order in which the two versions were performed alternated every night.

Two Merchants was performed as part of the Theatre at UBC's (The University of British Columbia) 2011-2012 season. The cast was comprised of the Intermediate Year BFA

Acting students of that year while the designers and crew were drawn from the BFA in Technical Theatre and the BA in Theatre program. I directed the play and adapted the script, in addition to conducting the audience response research. The production and research were part of my doctoral dissertation research aimed at developing ICE and evaluating its potential efficacy by using *Two Merchants* as a case study. The goal of the study was to develop a technique for creating entertainment that could effectively contribute to existing techniques for challenging and opposing radical, violent ideologies that can and do lead to conflict, terrorism and, potentially, to genocide.

Including the preview and the matinee, there were a total of 11 performances. The preview featured the JDW first (selected by coin toss), with the order alternating with every performance. 67% of audience members saw the show on a weekend (Friday or Saturday nights) while 62% of audiences saw the version of the show in which the JDW was performed first. The performances with the two largest house sizes (opening night and the matinee) were performed in different orders – with opening night featuring the MDW first and the matinee featuring the JDW first.

The running time for the show, which included a fifteen minute intermission, ranged from 143 to 150 minutes, with an average running time of 147 minutes. In total, 860 people saw *Two Merchants* over its run (including the preview).[2] Of these, 448 completed questionnaires resulting in a response rate of 52%. Ten people volunteered to complete individual interviews and there were an additional two focus group discussions, both taking place within classroom environments with twenty-two participants in one and six participants in the other.

Creating *Two Merchants*' Research Design

In its initial form, the audience response research was modelled on a within-subjects experimental model that could also be considered a field experiment, resulting in significant discussion about controlling variables within the production (order effects, differences in the quality of the acting, differences between the Jewish and Muslim versions, etc.). This initial process inspired much of the foundation for the final production of *Two Merchants*, including the need to alternate which act was viewed first, the decision to use the same cast playing the same characters in both acts and the choice to make as few changes as possible between the scripts of the two acts. In other words, what happened in one version had to happen in the other, and in very similar forms.

Some proposals from the early stage of the development process were not included in the final design, including the initial idea to include not one, but three questionnaires; one before the play, one at intermission and one at the end of the performance. In addition, early models included a quantitative survey utilising primarily Likert scale questions with a few open-ended questions comprising the qualitative elements of the questionnaire research.

It rapidly became apparent that, while such a proposal may arguably have made for a more rigorous research design, it was almost completely impractical in the context of a theatrical production. Asking audience members to complete three questionnaires in one night would likely result in significant participant fatigue and attrition. Furthermore, some of the questions that needed to be asked when discussing violent, intractable, ideologically motivated conflicts appeared potentially offensive – no matter how carefully worded. An additional challenge was the sheer range of possible ideological perspectives that could manifest in response to *Two Merchants* – attempting to ask specific questions that addressed all of these possibilities and come up with an appropriate scale for each of the answers resulted in an unmanageably long survey, or, more accurately, three unmanageably long surveys. Moreover, it was very likely that a quantitative questionnaire, being limited to highly specific questions, would exclude questions that could be potentially valuable.

Focusing the data collection on more open-ended questions and incorporating multiple data collection methods made it possible to collect a wide array of information without limiting the questions asked to only those topics I imagined might emerge. Consequently, all of the data collection techniques used focused on primarily qualitative responses, with only a few categorical questions included on the questionnaires. Moreover, in the interest of practicality, data was collected only after the performance of both acts, asking participants about any changes they perceived in their own views rather than attempting to 'measure' such changes through pre- and post- show questionnaires. The advantage of these adjustments was to allow for the maximum possible variation in responses while retaining the possibility of quantifying the qualitative data during the analysis process. Including only one questionnaire and multiple other data collection methods made the process far more feasible in the context of a theatrical production. Incorporating an integrative, mixed-methods analysis process (described later) resulted in the benefit of a number of quantitative analyses without sacrificing the breadth and depth of the responses obtained using qualitative methods.

Collecting Audience Response Data

The intention of this study was to explore the complexities of the perspectives on the Arab-Israeli conflict and to understand the ways in which people reconsidered their views after seeing the show, or the reasons why they did not. In addition, I hoped to understand how many audience members reconsidered their views, the number of those who did so in similar ways or for related reasons, as well as how those changes related to either demographic characteristics or other experiences of the production. These aims required the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods as well as multiple data collection strategies.

This study included five different data collection methods to explore audience responses to *Two Merchants,* including observation; a questionnaire; informal post-show discussions; interviews and focus groups. The data collection process took place during and shortly after (within weeks of) each performance, depending on the method utilised.

Audiences were observed; asked to complete a questionnaire and invited to participate in some informal, un-moderated discussions after the show, which were recorded using digital audio recorders. Audiences were also invited to volunteer to participate in either an interview or focus group discussion in the weeks after the performance. These methods are explained more fully below:

Observers: At each performance the audience was observed, including video recording one section of the house (with audience awareness of this and freedom to move out of video recording range).

Questionnaires: Questionnaires were placed on every seat in the house prior to each performance and audiences were invited to complete them. The questionnaire included a brief section of demographic questions followed by six categorical questions, each including the possibility for open-ended responses.

Interviews: Audience members were also invited to volunteer to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview within a few weeks of their seeing the performance. Every person who volunteered was contacted, although not all chose to participate. The interviews focused on the participant's experience of and response to the play, inviting a broad range of discussion topics.

Focus groups: Focus groups, on the other hand, were primarily used when an existing group, particularly class groups, attended the performance together. In that case, professors and students were invited to participate in a focus group discussion. They were similar in format to the depth interviews with the additional possibility for participants to question one another.

Post-show discussions: In response to suggestions from previous studies to attempt to create a more 'natural' setting for post-show discussions, *Two Merchants* incorporated a small bar into the set which was also a functional (paid) bar before the show, during intermission and after the performances. This, in combination with the use of small 'bar tables' as part of the set, serving as audience seating arrangements, created the illusion of turning the theatre into a small pub. Audiences were invited to stay after the show for a drink and for informal discussions. After each performance, crew members placed audio recorders on a number of tables, set to record. Audience members could either allow them to record their conversations or, if they preferred, turn them off or pause them at will.

This was an untried data collection technique, without any facilitator or moderator to encourage or direct discussions. The theoretical benefit of this approach was that it would enable a more 'natural' approach to understanding audience responses, attempting to create a common setting in which audience members may discuss a performance. One potential disadvantage was the obvious one of having no input or control over the direction

of the discussion. I had to trust that the participants would discuss topics of relevance to the research, or alternatively, to adapt the research in response to the outcome of these discussions. The other main disadvantage was its unfamiliarity; participants would be unfamiliar with this kind of post-show discussion format and might not respond as the researcher hoped.

Being Inclusive

The study design made it impossible to select or even monitor who participated in the research. This presented a challenge to issues of 'informed consent,' particularly regarding research participants who were under age. It was determined that including all participants – regardless of age – would be less harmful to them than excluding them, particularly as participation in completing questionnaires was voluntary. To have done so would have been stigmatizing and exclusionary to younger participants; would deny them a voice on a subject that could be extremely important to them; and would deprive the study of valuable information from a theoretically vulnerable and – in the future – influential group of participants. In addition, given the nature of the subject matter, requiring younger participants to obtain parental consent for participation (over and above their obvious 'permission' to attend a performance) would have created additional ethical problems. For example, if a teenager came from a family with particularly strong ideological connections, the parents may have attempted to control or limit what their son/daughter could say on this topic. It is not uncommon for parents and teenagers to have highly divergent views on issues relating to prejudice and the Arab-Israeli conflict and a teenager with differing views may not be encouraged to express them.

The Sample

The sample for this study varies depending on the data set one is discussing. Concerning any audience observations, the sample includes all 860 people who saw the show. Any quantitative data such as the frequencies and regression analyses only use the data from the completed questionnaires (creating a sample of 448 participants). Of the 448 questionnaires, 338 (approximately 82%) included responses to open ended questions. The remainder only completed the demographic portion of the questionnaire. Qualitative data came from several sources including the questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and recorded post-show discussions. Since the questionnaires and post-show informal discussions were anonymous, it is possible that people who completed a questionnaire also participated in an interview or focus group and possibly even a post-show discussion. As such, the sample size for the qualitative data is anywhere between 338 and theoretically 860 participants if all audience members participated in the post-show discussions. Since it is highly unlikely that the entire audience participated in the post-show discussions, A conservative estimate of sample size for the qualitative data is in the range of 400 participants. Overall, the sample for this study was somewhat biased towards young

females engaged in post-secondary education. That being said, there was also a significant range of participants from varied ethnic, religious, and occupational backgrounds.

Generalizable, Transferable and Saturated

One of the ways in which the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study conflict is in determining if the sample is generalizable, transferable or saturated. Quantitative studies emphasise generalizable outcomes, while qualitative research is more concerned with having reached saturation or outcomes that are transferable.

In quantitative analyses, a key question is whether or not the sample is 'representative,' reflecting (representing) the responses of a larger population and able to predict the responses of that population. In the case of this kind of audience response research, practical considerations such as time requirements and the limits of the amount of data collection to which you can subject a voluntary audience member, made a representative sampling strategy or a strictly experimental research design impossible.

As a result, statistically speaking, the sample for this study cannot be said to 'represent' anything other than the views of those who participated – in other words, the data is not statistically generalizable. Statistics aside, however, one could logically hypothesise that the responses of those who participated may reflect the views of the entire audience or perhaps even of those who would choose to see a show of this nature. Even if these results represent nobody other than the participants themselves, the results are still valuable given the likelihood that people will discuss the show, share their views and may themselves have been influenced by the production.

While the results of this analysis may not be statistically generalizable, it is likely that they are transferable in the sense that the study can be valuable in a variety of situations and contexts (Tracy 865). Transferability is determined by the readers of the research in that it is achieved when "readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation and they intuitively transfer the research to their own action" (Tracy 865). The responses from audience members indicate that the performance itself was 'transferable' in that many participants connected the content of the production to their own experiences and lives. It is extremely likely that the results of this audience response research will be transferable to other contexts, particularly in light of other research reporting similar findings (Gesser-Edelsburg).

From a qualitative perspective, the representativeness of the sample is de-emphasised in comparison with the desire to reach 'saturation': "when no new data emerge, when all leads have been followed, when negative cases have been checked, and when the story or theory is complete"(Mayan 63). While this description is not entirely accurate, as new information will almost always emerge, "there comes a time when doing another interview or analyzing another document or image is not helpful" (Mayan 63). Alternatively, saturation can be said to be the point at which the interviewer is able to think

with the story – to understand the 'story' being told by interviewees well enough that the interviewer can predict participant responses.

In this case, with so much qualitative data from such varied sources, saturation was reached relatively quickly, particularly given the range and variation of the questionnaire responses. In fact, the questionnaire responses revealed more varied information than the interview responses, which, while reaching saturation within themselves, did not represent the full range of possibilities explored by the questionnaire responses. For example, (interview discussions were almost entirely 'positive', including very little criticism or disagreement with the premise of the production, unlike questionnaire responses.

Response Rates

While the overall response rate – the number of questionnaires submitted as a percentage of the total number of people attending the show – was 52%, the average response rate – the mean of the response rates for each performance – was somewhat higher at 59%. The discrepancy is primarily due to a significantly lower response rate (31%) on opening night, however, there is also a strong indication that higher house sizes resulted in lower response rates. The correlation is significant at the $P < 0.01$ level using the Kendall tau rank correlation coefficient. It appears that the only time the response rates dropped below 50% was when the house size was higher than 100 audience members. This relationship will be addressed in greater detail later in this article.

Description of the Analysis Process

In an article published in the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research,* Castro et al. posit an integrative approach to analysing data from mixed methods studies. Unlike other approaches, which tend to analyse qualitative and quantitative data either in parallel or sequentially (Creswell 203-11), an integrative approach "integrates various data analytic procedures for a seamless transfer of evidence across qualitative and quantitative modalities"(Castro et al. 342). Such an approach depends on a unified approach to the study in which all data is conceptualised within a single unified framework (Castro et al. 344). The analysis involves a cyclical process of qualitative analysis leading to quantitative analysis, which then informs further qualitative analysis (Castro et al. 348-55). The cycle ends with a qualitative process that creates a 'story' from the combination of one round of qualitative and one round of quantitative analysis. The complete cyclical analysis process, based on the one developed by Castro et al. and used for the audience response data from *Two Merchants* is depicted graphically below:

First Round Analysis

Analysis began with transcribing the data and correcting any transcription errors. The open-ended demographic questions were then coded into quantitative variables and all

categorical attributes with too many classes for an effective quantitative analysis were collapsed into either binary or categorical variables possessing only three or four categories.

It was exceptionally rare for an interview or focus group participant to mention something that had not been raised in the questionnaire responses. The number and depth of responses to the questionnaires created a wealth of data that reached saturation. Moreover, the questionnaire answers were almost as detailed as the interview data and represented a far greater variety of responses. Consequently, the majority of the results included in the analysis and discussion come from the questionnaire data.
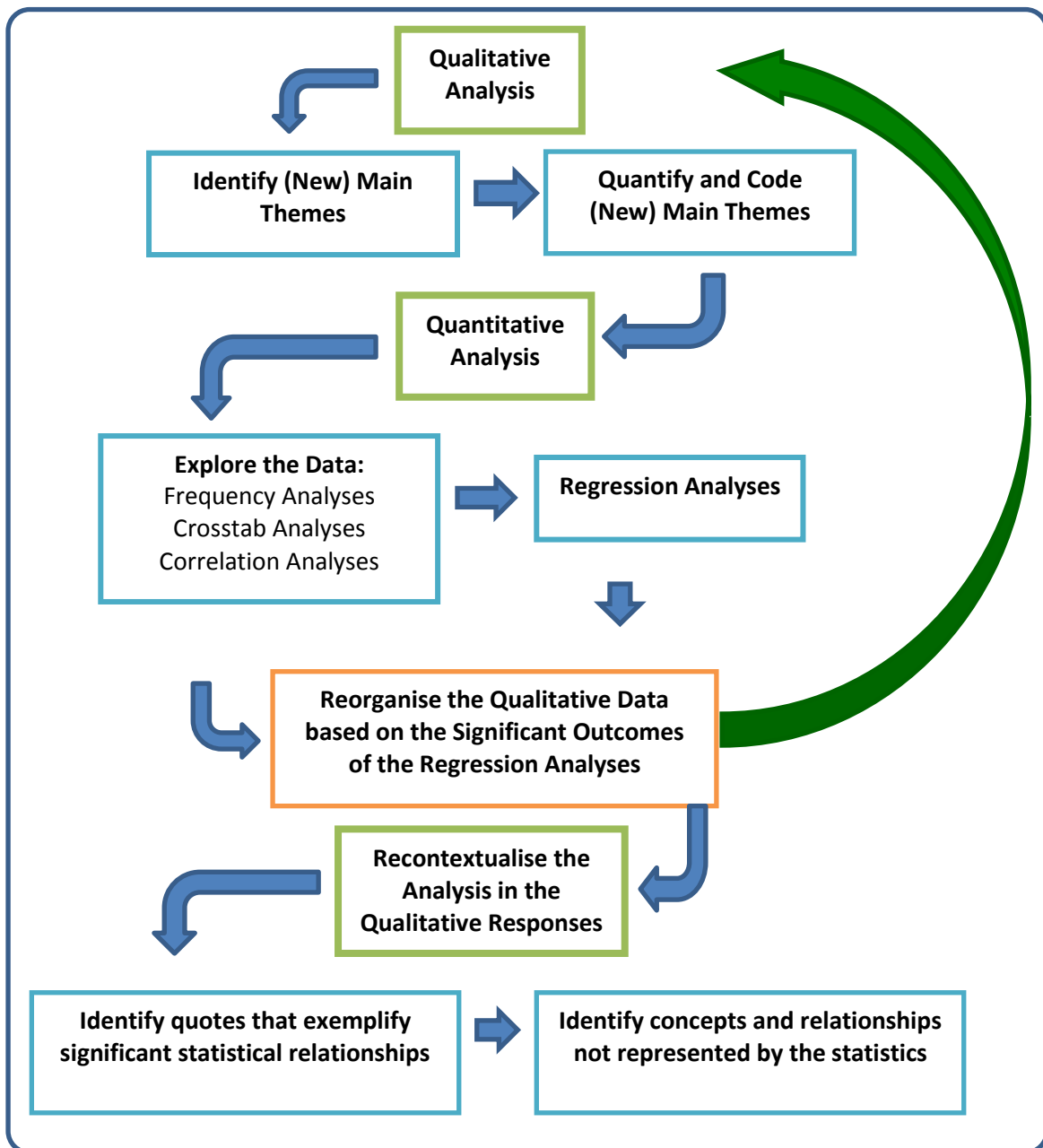
Figure 1: Cyclical Analysis Process. Figure by author.

Coding

Many of the queries on the questionnaires, by their phrasing, created their own *a priori* codes. For example, questions such as age, sex and the degree to which religion is important in one's life all imply a set of categorical codes. In addition, some of the open-ended questions also included a binary response option, such as asking participants if they will discuss the show with others. Again, these questions implied a set of *a priori* codes to be used in the analysis. In some cases, questions requiring a 'yes or no' response on the questionnaire had to be recoded to account for greater variation in the responses – such as participants adding 'maybe' as an option, or participants qualifying their responses in such a way as to require an additional category. This was particularly relevant for the question asking if participants reconsidered their views.

In addition, some of the demographic questions, including those asking participants to identify their occupation(s), ethnicity (ethnicities) and religion(s) were intentionally open-ended in order to allow participants to identify in the ways that made the most sense to them. The qualitative demographic responses were initially coded using empirical coding strategies with some of them re-coded based on *a priori* codes, often obtained from Statistics Canada census models. These qualitative responses were then distilled or collapsed into a number of categorical or binary quantitative variables for analysis.

One example of the coding process used for these demographic variables is the process used for coding responses to the question: "With what religion(s) do you identify?" Participants responded with twenty different identifications as noted below:

1. No Religion/Atheist
2. Many/All religions
3. Multi-faith
4. Not religious; culturally based or hereditary religious identification
5. Not religious, culturally Jewish
6. Not religious, culturally Muslim
7. Spiritual
8. Christian
   a. Catholic
   b. Anglican
   c. Protestant
   d. United Church
   e. Lutheran
   f. Unitarian
   g. Mennonite
   h. Mormon
   i. Maronite Christian
9. Jewish
10. Muslim
11. Agnostic
12. Buddhist
13. Hindu
14. Scientology
15. Sikh
16. Taoism
17. Cree Spiritual
18. Rastafarianism
19. Norse Heathonism
20. Other

While the above listing represents a list of the codes created through qualitative analysis, quantitative analysis based on such a large number of codes would be unusable in a sample of this size. Consequently, I collapsed some of the categories into the following seven codes:

1. No religion or Atheist
2. Multi-faith

3. Agnostic, Spiritual or Hereditary Religious Beliefs
4. Jewish or Culturally Jewish
5. Muslim or Culturally Muslim
6. Christian of any denomination
7. Other

These codes were used for early analyses requiring specific differentiation between Jewish and Muslim participants, however, statistically speaking, these groups were still small enough to require a particularly cautious approach to any analysis results. For the majority of the analysis, these categories were further collapsed into a binary code: those identifying with any religious or spiritual beliefs and those who identified as atheist.

Qualitative Analysis

The initial qualitative analysis separated responses to individual questions. For these responses, I used a combination of content and thematic analysis. I combined the *a priori* codes with an empirical coding strategy to understand what themes and concepts emerged from the data beyond the specific concepts that were directly relevant to the research question. In this case, I started by identifying as many small, specific themes as possible within the responses. Some of these included people talking about prejudice, hatred, *The Merchant of Venice*, individual characters or theatre in general. Very quickly the sheer quantity of codes became unwieldy, but at the same time, it became apparent that many individual codes could be grouped into broad 'families' of themes.[3]

With specific codes identified, the next layer of analysis was to identify themes – common threads woven amongst and between categories, connecting them (Mayan 97). Each of these themes was originally considered within the context of the questionnaire (or interview) questions to which audiences were responding. In later stages of the analysis, some of the themes were broadened to incorporate all questionnaire responses – in other words, to transcend the initial *a priori* codes imposed by the questionnaires themselves.

Quantitative Analysis

In order to understand how these qualitative concepts interacted with the quantitative variables, I also created quantitative codes for each of these themes. This process was helpful in understanding the frequency with which a given theme was mentioned among the participants. With so many respondents and themes to explore, quantifying the results was the only effective way to explore this aspect of the data. A binary coding system was the most efficient, identifying if people mentioned the theme or not. This level of coding made no distinctions between the ways in which the theme was discussed. For example, if a person mentioned any topic relating to 'ideology' in their responses to a given question, the response would be coded as 'yes' in that variable, while if no mention of ideology was included, the response would be coded as 'no'.

The quantitative analysis took place in several stages. The first was to explore the data through frequency and crosstab analyses. According to Castro et al. any dependent variable represented by fewer than 20% of the sample is unlikely to provide a large enough data set for effective analysis (Castro et al. 348). All the themes represented in this analysis were mentioned by at least 20% of the respondents. The initial frequencies, cross tabulation and correlation analyses were used to explore and understand the data and some preliminary relationships between variables.[4] The next level of analysis included regression analyses, modeling "the relationship between explanatory variables and a binary response variable" (Cook et al. 1). With all the dependent variables coded as binary variables, I used a binary regression analysis for all the themes. In this model, there were multiple potential explanatory variables (also described as independent variables) and one binary response (dependent) variable, which indicated the presence or absence of a given response. The regression analysis determined which of the explanatory variables best predicted the response variable. For example, in determining which demographic variables had the greatest impact on whether audiences would reconsider their views, the model included 'reconsider views' as the response variable and several explanatory variables such as age, version of the play seen first, sex and ethnicity. The result revealed whether, for example, one's age was the most significant predictor of one's likelihood to reconsider existing views. In all analyses, a 'significant predictor' was one in which $P < 0.05$.

Second Round Analysis

Returning to the qualitative data, I reorganised the responses based on the significant predictors indicated by the regressions. For example, if religion was a significant predictor of whether participants reconsidered their views, I reorganised the qualitative responses to Reconsidered Views so all the responses from participants who identified with a religion or spirituality were grouped together. I subsequently conducted a second qualitative analysis, again using empirical coding but with the specific intention of furthering my understanding of the relationships between the dependent variable and its predictor; in this example, between religion and reconsidering views, and the differences between the participants who identified with a religious or spiritual belief and those who did not.

In addition, with so many of the themes repeated across both questions (reconsider views and talk with others), it was logical to change the way in which these were coded. Rather than divide the participants' replies based on the individual survey questions, the responses to the entirety of each individual's responses on the questionnaire were coded together, thereby creating a set of main themes that transcended the boundaries inherent in the questionnaire. The responses to the individual survey questions regarding reconsidering views and talking with others could then become additional 'themes' in themselves. In addition, this round of qualitative analysis made it clear that the audience's attitudes towards the show (whether they liked or disliked it) were connected with these thematic responses. Consequently, I created an additional variable – attitudes to the show –

to be included as an independent variable (potential predictor variable) in the quantitative analyses.

Table 1: Dependent and Independent Variables: First Round

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables

• Version of the Play Seen First
• Age
• Sex
• Ethnicity: Western or non-Western
• Ethnicity: Multiple Ethnicities or Single Ethnicity
• Religion: Identify with a religion or spirituality; do not identify with religion or spirituality
• Religious Importance
• Read *Merchant of Venice*
• Seen *Merchant of Venice*
	• Reconsider Views (RV)
	  o Already Agree/Other (Binary)
	  o RV Ideology (Binary)
	  o RV Theatre (Binary)
	  o RV Arab-Israeli Conflict (Binary)
	  o RV Religion (Binary)
	• Talk with Friends (Binary)
	  o Talk about Ideology (Binary)
	  o Talk about Theatre (Binary)
	    ▪ Acting (Binary)
	    ▪ Design/Technical Elements (Binary)
	    ▪ Directing (Binary)
	    ▪ Adaptation (Binary)
	    ▪ Talk about *The Merchant of Venice* (Binary)
	  o Talk about the Arab-Israeli Conflict (Binary)
	  o Talk about Role Reversal (Binary)
	  o Talk about the Research (Binary)

This resulted in the creation of the six 'main themes:' the willingness of participants to reconsider their views; the intention to discuss the production with others after the show; ideology; role reversal; theatre; and the Arab-Israeli conflict. These themes were part of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, becoming the dependent variables for the second round of regression analyses. One additional theme – that of contradictions – was only included in the qualitative analyses.

Recontextualisation

The final step was to return to the qualitative data in order to contextualise the variation of responses and relationships explored in the quantitative analysis and to discover any 'outlying' responses that were not represented by the quantitative analysis but reflected elements of the qualitative responses. Castro *et al*. describes this as 'recontextualisation' (Castro et al. 354). The recontextualisation process was essential to both understanding the results of all the analyses and to ensuring that the full extent of the responses were included in my understanding of the results. While quantitative analyses focus on majority

perspectives, recontextualising the results helped to ensure that dissenting voices were also included.

Discussion

The audience responses to *Two Merchants* offered a wealth of insight into the potential for entertainment to effectively challenge conflict ideologies, existing perceptions of ideological conflicts in general, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular. Almost 40% of audience members who did not already agree with the premise of the production stated that they would reconsider their views, with all responses indicating increased tolerance, understanding and recognition of the complexity of the ideological issues addressed in the production. Additionally, 86% of the participants stated they would discuss the show with others, potentially extending its impact. 70% of the audience discussed ideological issues in their qualitative responses to the show, with only 31% mentioning the Arab-Israeli conflict specifically, indicating that the impact of the ideological message extends beyond the specific conflict addressed in the play.

These results are highly promising regarding the potential of ICE productions to challenge existing, even entrenched, ideological views. After seeing *Two Merchants*, many audience members reported gaining increased awareness of their own prejudices, recognised the persecution and discrimination faced by minority groups and an increased awareness of the potential for unjust laws to perpetuate and codify injustices.

The attitudes to the show expressed by audience members – whether they liked or disliked the production – were a significant predictor for almost every one of the outcomes measured in this analysis, emphasising the importance of the entertainment quality of the performance. Regardless of its academic or ideological content, the production was far more likely to encourage thought, debate and even ideological change when it was appealing to the audience. This finding is not remotely surprising when one considers narrative persuasion theory as outlined previously. Audiences who do not respond positively to a production are unlikely to be 'transported' into its imaginary world and, consequently, less likely to be swayed by any persuasive content. Conversely, audiences who are transported into the world of the play are more likely to express positive responses to the experience. Common sense also suggests that audience members who disliked the play, the adaptation or the ideological message will be highly unlikely to either be persuaded by its content.

This is further supported by the direction of the influence of attitudes to the show. Positive attitudes to the show predicted the audience's likelihood to reconsider their views, talk with others about the show and mention concepts related to ideology in their questionnaire responses. These were all measures of audience engagement with the content of the production; with its message and ideologically challenging themes. Negative views of the show, on the other hand, predicted audience's likelihood to discuss role reversal. The discussion of the role reversal for participants with negative views of the show focused on issues related to the structure of the play or the research – not the content. In

other words, when people liked the play they were able to engage with the content, when people disliked the play, they focused on its technical elements.

Some audience members raised the concern that only people already inclined to agree with the production would choose to attend it. Audience responses to *Two Merchants* did not show any indication of their being a pre-existing bias in favour of the production. In fact, the initial analyses revealed that only 15% of the audience explicitly stated that they already agreed with the views presented. 7% of audiences stated that they had no pre-existing views to reconsider. 31% of the audience said that they reconsidered their views after seeing *Two Merchants*, implying that they did not, in fact, have completely sympathetic views prior to attending the show. The remaining 47% said they would not reconsider their views. Some implied that their perspectives were already in line with what they interpreted in the production, but there were many who made it clear that they disagreed with the production on a number of levels. In fact 15% of the audience expressed distinctly negative opinions of the play and its content, clearly indicating that they did not have a pre-existing bias in favour of the production. It is interesting to note that the percentage of audience members with explicitly stated pre-existing views in favour of the show is identical to those with overt opposition to it. Of greater relevance to the argument made in this article in favour of mixed methods approaches to audience response research is that the information outlined above, while apparently quantitative, required both qualitative and quantitative analyses in order to understand whether the audience did, in fact, have any pre-existing bias in favour of the production.

Academics and Artistic Creation

Much can be learned from the results of this audience response research – results far more extensive than those reported here – however, this study also provided insight into the efficacy of the data collection mechanisms and the process of conducting research of this nature. Throughout the development of *Two Merchants* and the post-show research, it became apparent that one imperative of this kind of research was the need for all those contributing to it to understand the entirety of the process – even if only at a basic level. This ideal helped to ensure that the community of academics, designers, actors and artists that worked on the production were all working towards a common, unified vision. Such philosophy is common in the theatrical production process but became infinitely more challenging when combining artistic creation with academic research. Even during the creation of *Two Merchants*, taking place in an academic setting with some time devoted to educating the production team about the less familiar elements of the production (such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, or Muslim and Jewish traditions), there were still significant tensions arising between some of the academic requirements and the realities of theatrical practice.

Just as it is necessary to create a unified team, it is also helpful to divide responsibilities, particularly between those responsible for conducting the data collection and analysis and those creating the entertainment itself. It is necessary for audiences to be

free to express critical and even negative views of the production when sharing their responses. It is likewise necessary for the researchers and analysts to be able to collect and analyse those perspectives without the influence of the emotional investment in the production that is necessary for those directly involved in the production process (directors, designers, actors, etc.).

In this respect, one could add an additional level of meaning to the term 'mixed-methods' and its value to this type of research. While mixed-methods, thus far, has referred to the combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches, it is also important to note that when applied to audience response research, a third 'method' is included – that of artistic creation. Just as the qualitative and quantitative approaches can be used harmoniously in an integrative research design and analysis, so too can the research and artistic aspects of a production collaborate to create an approach to audience response research that is truly integrative of qualitative, quantitative and artistic approaches.

The Regression Analyses

The findings of the regression analyses offered a number of insights into the audience that could help to enhance the efficacy of future productions of this nature and would be difficult to assess accurately using qualitative methods alone. For example, when considering which participants were willing to reconsider their views in response to *Two Merchants*, the regression analyses suggested that this play was more effective for young audience members as well as for participants who identified with any religion or spiritual belief.

While the influence of *Two Merchants* may have been enhanced for younger audiences or those identifying with a religion or spiritual belief system, that does not necessarily mean that the same would hold true of other productions. These results could imply that future productions of this nature could be most valuable for audiences under 21 years old or audiences with some spiritual or religious connections. They could also suggest, however, that it is necessary to find a way to reach those participants who were most resistant to this production. In fact, both are likely true. *Two Merchants* was influential for some audience members. The results of the regression analysis help to identify not only those audience demographics to which future productions like *Two Merchants* should be addressed, but also the demographics for which different interventions need to be created. Without the quantitative elements of the analysis, this information would not have been readily apparent. Even if the link between age, spirituality and whether participants reconsidered views had become apparent, the quantitative analysis made it clear that these variables were more significant predictors than any others.

Data Collection

The data collection itself can also be refined further based on the *Two Merchants* experiences. While most of the data collection processes used on this project had been

tested in other contexts, the informal post-show discussion structure was untried. While the principle of establishing a more 'natural' post-show discussion environment is sound, in this context it was not a particularly effective method for data collection for a number of reasons. Audiences appeared to expect a more formal discussion process, such as the 'talk back' sessions that are becoming popular for many productions. The unfamiliarity of this process for the audiences coupled with their expectation of some degree of moderation may have inhibited discussion. For such a process to be effective in the future, it might be preferable to use multiple moderators around the theatre to facilitate discussions among smaller groups while still retaining a degree of informality that is not present in deliberately planned focus groups.

An additional influence that appeared to reduce the extent of both post-show discussions and participation in interviews or focus group discussions was the nature of the questionnaires. The questionnaires included several open-ended questions to which many audience members provided lengthy, and detailed responses, often staying in their seats for as long as 30 minutes after the performance in order to do so. This process almost certainly reduced the frequency of post-show discussions and also may have contributed to the relatively small number of interview volunteers, as audience members may have justifiably felt that they had provided enough of a contribution through the questionnaire. While the comprehensive questionnaires may have inhibited some forms of data collection, the incredible wealth of information contained in these responses should not be undervalued. They were indisputably the most valuable source of data for this research and their anonymity enabled audiences to provide full and uninhibited responses to the production resulting in an exceptionally wide range of perspectives being represented.

The greatest limitation of all the data collection processes used in this project, and in fact, for audience response research in general, was the challenge of assessing long-term impact. The anonymity of the questionnaires and post-show discussions made following up with participants an impossibility. Likewise, with such a low response rate for interviews and focus-groups, revisiting those individuals after any significant amount of time would have proved exceptionally difficult. The nature of the sampling process for research of this nature makes any data collection other than that conducted immediately after the performances challenging. This is a problem both in terms of collecting clarifying data from participants and for understanding the long-term impact of the production and can hopefully be addressed in future studies.

One finding from *Two Merchants* that may help this process was the relationship between house size and response rate. With the exception of the matinee (which was an unusual audience comprised mostly of students required to attend the production), the only time the response rate dropped below 50% was when the house size exceeded 100 people. In fact, the smaller the house size, the higher the response rate. From a research point of view, this indicates that audience response researchers may wish to limit house sizes to less than one hundred participants. It should be noted that the effect may be unrelated to the total house size, but rather to the percentage of the total possible house size (in this case,

100 people is slightly less than one-half the potential house size of the theatre). In other words, the effect may be due to audiences witnessing a half-full theatre and feeling more compelled to participate. In addition, the use of a thrust stage, a theatre with an intimate audience-stage relationship, and a bar in the theatre itself may have had an additional impact on the response rates. Further study would be helpful in refining the relationship between house size, audience layout and response rates in order to maximise the potential responses for research of this nature.

The house size to response rate ratio, however, reveals another of the methodological challenges inherent in this type of research: the tension between the theatrical and academic requirements of these productions. The indication that smaller houses may improve response rates, while potentially beneficial for the researchers is problematic for theatre artists for whom large house sizes are necessary, primarily for recovering the financial cost of the production. The process of creating *Two Merchants* was replete with similar contradictions from the timing of the ethics review process in relation to the production schedule to the timing of academic feedback on design elements. In the first instance, it was necessary to submit completed marketing materials for ethics review long before such materials had been created on the standard production schedule. Similarly, the academic team needed to give feedback on completed design elements, however, on a (usually) tight production schedule, by the time the necessity is recognised, there is often not enough time to make significant changes. While both the processes for creating theatrical productions and conducting research are effective independently, when attempting to combine the two there are tensions and oppositions between the requirements of each.

Such differences are not only apparent in the respective processes of theatre and research, but also in the content of the production itself. Many of the intellectual subtleties included in *Two Merchants* appeared to go unnoticed by most audience members. For example, in each of the Jewish or Muslim worlds different characters reflected – through costume, actions and words – a range of religious identification from secular to extreme. It is possible that these subtleties were unconsciously accepted by audience members, but it is equally likely that they were simply too subtle to be effectively conveyed in a theatrical setting. One example of this is the variation in ideological perspectives included in all the characters of *Two Merchants*: many audience responses suggest that most of this subtlety appeared to be subsumed under the more dominant binary clash between Jew and Arab. This is not to say that intellectual complexity and subtlety are wasted on theatre; on the contrary, such subtleties are essential to the success of productions of this nature, however they need to be conveyed in such a way as to be 'readable' to an audience. The frequent clash between academic and theatrical requirements further supports the need for an integrated theatre-research team that can collaborate to resolve the process differences and support one another on the presentation of intellectually elusive content.

Conclusions and the Future

Audience response research conducted in mostly conventional theatrical settings for any purpose beyond market-research is still a relatively uncommon phenomenon. Even in more academic or Applied Theatre settings, coupling theatre and academic research is still an emerging approach. It seems clear from this study that when conducting research on this scale, with the hope of obtaining as many varied audience perspectives as possible, research methods such as questionnaires including at least some open-ended questions are the strongest data collection mechanism. Mixed-methods studies that take advantage of the strengths of both approaches can significantly enhance the possible analyses and applications of those outcomes (Creswell 8). While the sheer quantity of data collected through a predominantly qualitative questionnaire can be daunting, particularly with a large sample, the benefit of such an approach cannot be understated. The ability to quantify some of the qualitative responses, however, makes it possible to not only understand the subtleties, but also their prevalence and how they connect with other themes, demographic information and experiences (Creswell 12-13).

For example, one very rare theme that emerged in response to *Two Merchants* was the view, held by only a small handful of individuals, that the Jewish characters were over-sexualised. As a highly rare comment, it did not manifest in any of the quantitative data but it was interesting enough to warrant some further exploration. This criticism primarily seemed to exist for audience members who saw the MDW first, suggesting that perhaps this viewpoint emerged when the Jewish characters were being compared with their more publically conservative Muslim counterparts (since the production takes place in public spaces, there are some cultural differences in how intimacy is appropriately communicated in the respective dominant cultures). When the Jewish characters appeared first – with no existing Muslim frame of reference for comparison – this concern did not arise. A quantitative or qualitative analysis alone would have been unlikely to reveal this relationship.

While the questionnaires had significant value, the more personal approaches to data collection such as interviews and post-show discussions may be more suited to other studies. The experience of this research suggests that such approaches need to be designed with the expectations of the audience members in mind. A process that is unfamiliar or actively diverging from conventional techniques should be approached with caution and, perhaps, combined with familiar elements. That being said, the inclusion of multiple data collection methods and an integrative, mixed methods approach to the research design and analysis were invaluable to this research and strongly recommended for future studies of a related nature.

Biographical note:

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Notes:

[1] This article is based on the methodological approach for my doctoral dissertation Dana Lori Chalmers, "If You Wrong Us, Shall We Not Revenge? Daring Entertainment to Challenge Ideologies of the Arab-Israeli Conflict," Doctoral Dissertation, University of British Columbia 2014. For further information on ICE or the results of this study, the dissertation is available online through the University of British Columbia library.

[2] This number is only approximate because we do not have an actual house count for the only matinee performance. The performance was sold out, but not everybody who had a ticket attended the show. The house size included for the matinee is based on the best estimates of myself and the observer who, while not recording observations, did attend the performance.

[3] In grounded theory language, this process combines both open and axial coding. Steve Borgatti, *Introduction to Grounded Theory*, Available: http://www.analytictech.com/mb870/introtogt.htm, 20 December 2013.

[4] All the correlation analyses used Spearman's rho or Spearman's rank correlation coefficient with $P < 0.05$ unless otherwise stated. The statement that '$P < 0.05$' means that there is a 5% possibility that this result was arrived at by chance. In other words, it is highly unlikely that this result is an accident. P reflects an estimate of probability and the statement that $P < 0.05$ indicates that the result may be regarded as 'statistically significant'.