

Editors' introduction: Themed Section on theatre audiences

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In this themed section we are delighted to present thirteen new papers on theatre audience research. In doing so we wonder if this might mark the point within theatre studies when we can stop bemoaning the absence of audiences as a topic of empirical research.

This absence can always be contested, for it is inevitably possible to point to examples of foundational empirical work on theatre audiences. These include what are particularly strong threads in a European research tradition (e.g. Willmar Sauter; Henri Schoenmakers; Peter Eversmann), along with an established body of methodologically-grounded research into theatre audiences in historical contexts (e.g. Richard Butsch; Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow's 2001 book *Reflecting the Audience; Theatre Survey* 39.2, 1998). The gap may not be absolute, therefore, but nonetheless there has certainly been a *feeling* of absence. A feeling that led one of the editors of this themed section to remark in 2004, also in an article in *Participations*, that 'there is little empirical research asking whether there is indeed a distinct nature to audiences' experiences of live theatre' (Reason 2004: n.p.). Elsewhere, Ric Knowles writes in *Reading the Material Theatre* that 'precisely *how* audiences produce meaning in negotiation with the particular, local theatre event [...] has only rarely been analysed or modelled in any detail' (2004: 17); while, possibly most frequently cited, Helen Freshwater in *Theatre & Audience* describes empirical audience research as 'the road less travelled' in theatre studies (2009: 27).

Prompted by this themed section we performed a small quantitative piece of research of our own, and counted the number of articles on theatre audiences published in *Participations*: which, as the 'Journal of Audience and Reception Studies', is perhaps the most significant in its field. Since the first issue of *Participations* in November 2003 there have been around 370 full-length articles in total. Of these only four have had a primary focus on theatre

audiences, of which only one – Reason 2004 – contained any empirical research into living audiences.¹

Of course this isn't to ignore the existence of empirical theatre audience research published elsewhere. Three significant collections have emerged from Australia in the last few years: a recent edited collection, *The Audience Experience: A Critical Analysis of Audiences in the Performing Arts* (Radbourne, Glow and Johanson 2013); the outcome of major cross-institutional empirical audience research, *Young Audiences, Theatre and the Cultural Conversation* (O'Toole et al 2013); and a special issue of *About Performance* on 'Audiencing: The Work of the Spectator in Live Performance' in 2010. Meanwhile in the UK, AHRC-funded projects such as 'Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy' (2008-2011) and 'Cultural Value' (2013-2015, represented in this section by Julie Wilkinson's article) indicate investment in cross-disciplinary research into audiences in different contexts. It is also possible to point towards publications by individual researchers in theatre,² while there also exist other pockets of active research in cognate areas such as stand-up comedy,³ live music (most recently a valuable monograph edited by Burland and Pitts 2014), and dance.⁴

Once you start to look, then, it is clear that empirical theatre audience research does exist. Indeed, sometimes assertions of its absence are the result of a partial disciplinary myopia, a failure to look across the boundaries of subjects or methodologies. Nonetheless, there is a sense that until recently empirical research in theatre studies has largely consisted of sporadic pockets of activity, rather than something fully integrated into the subject area as a whole. This is why we are hopeful to have reached a turning point, with fresh research activities bringing established scholars together with new voices and thereby creating something of a critical mass. This possibility is certainly suggested by the contributions included here, with some of our authors engaging in valuable discussions of previous or ongoing studies, while others reflect on the results of their initial (often PhD-led) forays into audience research. It is also true of the editorial team itself, with one of the editors (Reason) having worked in this field for over a decade, while the other (Sedgman) is currently anticipating the publication of her first large-scale empirical project. It is also encouraging that the authors here represent an international (albeit Western) perspective, with contributions from the UK, Canada, Australia, France and Denmark. We are therefore delighted that with this themed section theatre audiences declare their presence within *Participations*, and we feel reasonably confident in asserting that this represents one of the most significant and valuable single manifestations of empirical research into contemporary theatre audiences.

We have elected to structure this themed section in two parts: the first titled 'Institutions, Values, Voices', the second 'Participation, Immersion, Intimacy'. Both parts have their own introduction, which present our editorial framing of the debates they contain. This division, together with our sense of where contributions are coming from and the methodological approaches adopted, has allowed us to reflect on the current state and future health of empirical theatre audience research.

First of all, out of the wide range of proposals prompted by our initial call for papers there emerged a strong emphasis on participatory and immersive practices. As new forms that

steadily push at the boundaries of live performance, these have often been the subject of what are arguably – at least in some cases – rather over-inflated claims. In the contributions collected here we can therefore see the results of what is perhaps a natural desire to test the limits of these claims, with questions of ‘agency’ and ‘intimacy’ particularly thoroughly explored. Secondly, there can also be seen a collective desire to pick away at the common idea that getting audiences to ‘participate’ – particularly in their diversity – is a political and empowering act. Here, what *counts* as ‘participation’, along with who usually gets to answer this question, is systematically scrutinised. And thirdly, one of the major strengths of this collection is the diversity of approaches adopted, with particular methodologies utilised in response to the specific context of the research.

With this in mind, the work of editing this collection has encouraged us to do something else, which is to really consider what we mean when we talk about ‘good’ research. Within the context of empirical audience research, high-quality studies mark themselves out in two main ways. The first, a willingness to show how the responses of audiences are embedded in different contexts and to consider the ways varying research approaches are able to capture certain kinds of knowledge. And the second, an openness to making manifest the strengths and limits of the claims that one is therefore able to make. We believe we can claim that this collection goes at least some way to meeting these aims.

Having said that, we also recognise the need to avoid becoming too puritanical in our eagerness for rigorous empirical research. It is a truism that in any study limitations become weaknesses only when they pass unobserved, so we should avoid allowing the methodologically ideal to get in the way of the methodologically possible. In other words, audience research has to be pragmatic. It doesn't always need to take place on a grand scale, with big questionnaires or in-depth interviews – although these certainly have their place. As the contributions here demonstrate, whether responses are captured via fan-mail letters sent to theatre practitioners, or through undergraduate student essays, or by participants walking around a performance site talking to each other, audience research can also gather useful knowledge through smaller or more concentrated studies. What matters above all else – and what our authors here achieve – is to take the challenge of addressing audiences’ experiences seriously.

*To coincide with this themed section a new online resource has been launched for international scholars and practitioners interested in live performance audiences, from theatre to music to dance, to stand-up comedy and beyond. Visit **The Performing Audience Research Network** (www.performingaudiences.com) to discuss ideas and projects, share news, ask questions, promote CfPs and other opportunities, and publicise events.*

Editor Notes:

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Experiences of Theatre (Trentham 2010) and co-edited with Dee Reynolds *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Contexts* (Intellect 2012). Contact: m.reason@yorks.ac.uk.

Kirsty Sedgman is an independent early-career researcher, having recently gained her PhD from Aberystwyth University. Her book *Locating the Audience: How People Found Value in National Theatre Wales* will be published by Intellect in early 2016. Her current research projects include what it means to 'know the rules' – or otherwise – during experimental promenade performances, how people experience 'authenticity' in actor-performed poetry, and how big musical numbers can feel intimate to audiences. Contact: kirsty@performingaudiences.com.

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Notes:

¹ The others had either a historical or a demographic focus.

² An incomplete list would include Martin Barker's interventions into debates around liveness (2003, 2012, 2013), Reason's research into children and young audiences (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), John Tulloch's work on audience reception (2000, 2009), Ben Walmsley's studies of marketing, motivation and perceptions of value (2011, 2013), and a number of outputs on audience development and arts marketing from the Australasian (Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow, Katya Johanson, Rebecca Scollen) and Nordic (Anja Lindelof, Louise Hansen, Kathrine Winklehorn) traditions. In the specific context of theatre for young people, both Jeanne Klein (1993, 2005, and many others) and

Shifra Schonmann (2006) have offered major publications drawing on extensive qualitative and quantitative research.

³ For example, see the November 2011 *Participations* special themed section on comedy audiences (Vol. 8, Iss. 2).

⁴ In dance in particular this research has often been conducted outside the discipline of traditional dance studies, in areas such as psychology and cognitive neuroscience – for example Christensen and Calvo-Merino 2013, Stevens 2005, Stevens et al 2009, Glass 2005, Jola et al 2011.