

Making an Exhibition of a Theatre Audience: Research Through Photography

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Rachel Nash and Will Garrett-Petts observe, “There is relatively little about...research through visual art (where artistic practice becomes a vehicle for producing and presenting new knowledge).” This paper is a case study of a photographic exhibition employed as both an end in itself and a means to enhance the profile of a project of which it forms a part and to thereby generate public involvement in our research. As part of our CURA research on professional theatre as a builder of community in small cities, James Hoffman and I engaged audience members of Western Canada Theatre as subjects in a photographic exhibition shot on the theatre stage, shown in the theatre lobby, and documented in a catalogue. This paper will explain and analyze the processes of recruiting, photographing, and interviewing the subjects. It will also describe exhibition and catalogue preparation and provide the theory and rationale behind our attempts to incorporate visual research and other unconventional approaches into our work as we reach beyond traditional surveys of theatre audiences.

An image, painted, sculpted, photographed, built, and framed, is also a stage performance. What the artist places on that site and what the viewer sees performed on it lend the image a dramatic quality, as if it were able to prolong its existence through a story whose beginning the viewer has missed and whose ending the artist cannot tell. The space of drama is not necessarily contained only by the stage of a theatre...

-- *Alberto Manguel*

Introduction: Rationale

Rachel Nash and Will Garrett-Petts have found writing on “research *through* visual art (where artistic practice becomes a vehicle for producing and presenting new knowledge)” scant. This paper discusses a photographic exhibition undertaken to produce and present new knowledge *and* to generate increased public involvement in our research – to produce, present, and instigate research. In this context, the exhibition both announces and requests; it provides answers and asks questions.

I am a researcher in the Mapping Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) project at Thompson Rivers University, and I am working with Dr. James Hoffman, TRU Theatre professor, in a study on the relationships of professional theatre companies in British Columbian small cities to their communities. In keeping with CURA’s current mandate, our research emphasizes inclusivity and openness; we see both academic and popular audiences for our work. We are especially interested in three interrelated questions: Does professional

theatre build community? What do citizens—both attendees and non-attendees—perceive as the major purposes for attending professional theatre? How might the companies enhance their connections to their communities?

In addition to consulting existing studies—which usually examine large cities—we have employed various quantitative and qualitative tools to address these questions. We have conducted interviews of theatre personnel, civic leaders, and audience members, solicited and received personal narratives from members of each of these three groups, and administered surveys—both by phone and in writing—to audience members. Each of these methods is valid in itself but these methods together have generated interesting, useful data that will provide partial answers to our questions. However, as theatre scholar Susan Bennett pointedly observes about the now-widespread use of surveying by theatre companies themselves, it “assures the maintenance of the existing relationship between mainstream production and the small percentage of the population who attend” (89).

To that end, we have, as Bennett advocates, taken “the more interesting and useful approach” of extending surveying outside the major institutions. Our surveying of the audience of another local theatre company, Project X, and of the Kamloops audience for the local showing of a production by Vancouver’s Headlines Theatre, has assured us responses from non-mainstream theatregoers. Although there is likely to be some crossover between these audiences and those of main stage Western Canada Theatre (WCT) productions, the nature of these two companies and the particular productions during which we administered the surveys assures an additional audience, most significantly, a younger demographic with less exposure to theatrical productions, who are likely to have different ideas about the nature and function of plays.

However, a still greater percentage of the population does not attend theatre, or attends only rarely. We have begun to reach out to a broader demographic of the population by administering surveys to diverse community groups, including a branch of the Kamloops Rotary Club, students and teachers at Kamloops Immigrant Services, the Kamloops and District Labour Council, the Kamloops Women’s Resource Group Society, the Kamloops Farmers’ Market Board, and the Kamloops Chapter, Council of Canadians.

Our photographic exhibition has its genesis in our attempts to go beyond the more conventional research methods and more conventional theatre audiences by incorporating visual research into the study of a visual medium. Our approach to this research was inspired by a photographic exhibition of subscriber testimonials in the lobby of the Vancouver Playhouse that Hoffman encountered by chance. He found this foregrounding and showcasing of the theatre audience stimulating. We assume the purpose of that exhibit was to attract attention to, provoke interest in and increase ticket sales for the Playhouse productions. In other words, at base it was an advertisement, a marketing strategy. We are also aware of other ways that theatre lobbies are used for publicity and commercial purposes. For example, several non-profit theatres in the US have placed video monitors in lobbies to display material targeted at theatregoers (“Coming to a Lobby Near You”).

Our purposes in photographing audience members of Kamloops’s Western Canada Theatre, exhibiting those photographs in the lobbies of the mainstage (Sagebrush) and second stage (Pavilion) venues of WCT, and creating a substantial catalogue to document the event, are manifold. We wish to celebrate a company—and its loyal audience—that has been playing an instrumental role in the cultural life of a community for more than three decades. Furthermore, we see in visual inquiry the opportunity for research that reaches out—that speaks to the general theatregoer—and is collective. J. Gary Knowles and Teresa C. Luciani advocate the use of visual arts in qualitative inquiry as a means to embrace interconnectivity, to remind the individual that she/he is part of a collective whole (5-6) and we saw this project as accomplishing that and, thus, as a most appropriate means to examine what is, after all, the collective activity of attending theatre. Our intellectual curiosity was piqued at the possibilities that this repositioning—giving the audience starring roles, both through being photographed on stage and being exhibited in a theatre venue—might raise. We also envisioned the photographic exhibit as a complement to the more conventional, extensive written surveying of theatre

attendees and non-attendees that we had been doing. More self-servingly, we anticipate that presenting part of our findings in our CURA study on the role of professional theatre in promoting community will not only enhance the involvement of those who participated in the shoot, but also generate greater public interest and participation in our research project. Finally, we anticipate the show will spark some healthy discussion both within and beyond the local theatre community in a way that more conventional surveying may not.

We also believe that there is a neat artistic logic in choosing a visual medium to display the results of our research into a visual genre – particularly when both focus on human subjects. Although, as Helen Gilbert notes, photography “presents its subjects to the viewer as an inert, mechanically reproduced image” whereas “performance displays a live body, albeit still a coded representation of something/one else” (she asserts that, therefore, a photograph invokes the absence of the subject, whereas the performances tends to insist upon its presence”) she also observes, as have Barthes and many others, that “photography creates the illusion of...exact correspondence between the signifier and the signified” (21). In other words, in both media there is the semblance of reality. Further, perhaps in the context of our exhibit—large likenesses of a select segment of “real people” who inhabit a small city and attend its only professional theatre—the photographs would be as likely to invoke, if not presence, at least recognition or even identification, as absence.

Recruiting and Soliciting Participants

In the programs of WCT’s 2007 Christmas show (*Disney’s Beauty and the Beast*) we inserted fliers designed to elicit two levels of involvement: telephone interviewing and in-person interviewing and photographing. The theatre company also called attention to the fliers in pre-show chats. Although there were a few glitches in this process, most notably that not all brochures had the flier included, we did get a satisfactory response.

The audience participation request was short and simple: we provided a brief explanation of our research followed by a few questions designed to establish demographics such as age, gender, and frequency of attendance, and then boxes to tick off indicating which of the two options (telephone or in-person interview) the audience member preferred. We estimated time requirements for each option in order to assure potential respondents that commitment would not be onerous.

At the end of the show’s run we, with CURA student researchers Kirby Booker and Erin Hoyt, selected from what we were by then calling the “shoot” respondents a manageable number of participants reflecting demographics that were as wide as possible. We looked primarily at age, occupation, and location (that is, in what part of the city or region they lived).

An endeavour such as this requires a capable stable of assistants—indeed, it is only fair to call it a collaborative venture—and we were fortunate to be able to draw on the skills and talents of not only Booker and Hoyt, but also, of TRU colleagues and WCT personnel. Booker and Hoyt telephoned the pool of “shoot” participants to notify them of the shoot date, and administered the phone surveys to the other respondents. Luckily, Kirby Booker is also an experienced photographer, and we enlisted her to take photographs that would complement those of our primary photographer, TRU Visual Arts Professor, Eileen Leier. As our research partner, Western Canada Theatre was cooperative in providing Ben Reedy, WCT technician, to assist us.

Shooting the Show

One evening in early January 2008, we met with the fourteen participating audience members in the Sagebrush Theatre. Eileen assembled her camera and tripod to take straight-on shots, and Kirby

prepared to take more random snaps: side views, long shots, etcetera. We worked with Ben to create a backdrop that was fairly bare and gave the illusion of spontaneity: a few props were placed, apparently haphazardly, on the black stage. Erin organized the participants and called them to the stage individually. In the end, we also took several shots of the group as a whole.

Our goal was to literally and metaphorically put the audience on stage. As the evening wore on and they became more comfortable, the participants evolved into character and became spectators of each other. When they weren't on stage or observing the other participants on stage, they were responding to surveys (which we subsequently administered, with the addition of some prefatory material, to the community groups I mentioned earlier).

Preparing the Show and Catalogue

At this point, we envisioned an exhibition of some combination of the photos and survey text excerpts in the lobby of the Sagebrush Theatre to coincide with the final show of the 2007-2008 season in late March 2008, with a modest pamphlet to accompany it. However, we opted to take more time to prepare the exhibit, deciding that it would coincide with the first main stage show of the 2008-2009 season, in October of 2008. As is the custom with research projects, or even research events within research projects, things proliferated. We were fortunate that the TRU Undergraduate Student Conference in March 2008 allowed for a sneak preview: Booker and Hoyt, with technical input from research assistant Bill Greene in the TRU Centre for Innovation in Culture and the Arts in Canada, produced several posters that were exhibited in the student art show held in conjunction with the conference. Their work generated important feedback. On the advice of TRU Associate Vice President of Research, Dr. Nancy Van Wagoner, our modest pamphlet became a catalogue, which, with the encouragement of CURA director Dr. Will Garrett-Petts, became ever grander in scale, and we worked with book designer Mairi Budreau to produce the catalogue. We also opted to expand to two venues. By adding the second stage venue of WCT, the Pavilion, to our exhibit, we felt we would reach beyond the existing mainstage audience and into the younger demographic of the Pavilion audience; the plays staged there are considered edgier.

Our catalogue includes black and white photos of each of the audience participants individually, as well as a cover shot of the group, and three articles. Hoffman presents a general overview of contemporary theatre audience research, Hoyt provides an introduction to the theatrical climate and community interest in the arts during the early days of the company, and I offer an analysis of the surveys collected from the two groups. Budreau's own photos of the lobby—inside and out—are also part of the catalogue. As well as offering us a permanent record of the exhibition, the catalogue could provide elaboration on our purposes and findings for those interested in further participation in our research. We also envision it as a teaching tool in senior level theatre and drama courses, as well as in research and service learning courses.

In order to compose the panels for the exhibit itself, we again enlisted Greene's assistance. We worked with him to produce an exhibit that would have maximal visual impact, be aesthetically pleasing, and provide the viewer with a sense of each individual participant's personality and attitude toward Western Canada Theatre, both through the photographs and the excerpts of their statements. At approximately four feet wide and nearly six feet long, the exhibit panels are close to life size.

We elected to go with the simple salon style—unframed on print-quality paper—for ease of mounting and because it fits with the informal atmosphere we wish to create. The mounting of the exhibit, planned for October 2008, was to be done both casually and dramatically to make use of the interior spaces of both lobbies.

Exhibition as Visual Research Site

Meanwhile, as the data from the various phone and written surveys we had administered to attendees and non-attendees were being analyzed, a few commonalities were emerging. First, there was vagueness about what types of plays respondents would like to see more of on the WCT stages. “Better plays” was a common reply. As well, there was ambiguity in the responses to questions about the major purpose of WCT. For example, most saw the company as primarily an entertainment venue, yet most also seemed to see deeper social and cultural purposes as most important. Obviously, either our survey questions had to be tweaked—something difficult to do retroactively—or we had to find some venue for soliciting audience response to a question pointedly designed to get a more specific reply. It seemed logical that devising some way for audiences to respond to a few specific questions when they were viewing “It’s Your Cue: The Audience Show” would not only likely achieve our desired result but would also increase that audience’s sense of participation, in both WCT and in our research.

With input from Lori Marchand and Düsan Magdolen at Western Canada Theatre, as well as Hoyt, we decided that our surveying would take both conventional and unconventional forms. WCT administers a survey annually that is confidential and deposited into a box in the lobby during the first mainstage show. This year, however, the WCT survey will be augmented by two other surveys: a brief public written survey and an oral survey of a performative nature.

The brief public survey will take the form of a flip chart and markers that we will place in the lobbies to allow attendees to provide a visible response to two questions:

My all-time favourite Western Canada Theatre show is _____
 because _____.
 One thing I would like to see more of at WCT is _____.

We anticipate that theatregoers will be prompted and stimulated by the responses of others. It will be interesting, as well, to compare the private responses of the traditional survey with the more public ones of the flip chart. We plan to have this survey in place for the entire run of both WCT shows (approximately two weeks in each case) in order to get a broader spectrum of responses, including those from attendees at other non-theatrical events, such as musical performances. I should also note that Regina’s Globe Theatre did something similar in the context of audience development in 2000: coloured notes with the company’s questions were posted on the walls, and theatregoers responded on those same pages. Artistic director Ruth Smillie was particularly impressed with “the dialogue that develop[ed] between audience members” as a result of this public qualitative surveying (Mendenhall).

In addition, on the opening nights of the Sagebrush and Pavilion shows, Hoyt will coordinate a group of students who will be in character as allegorical figures representing the various purposes—entertainment, social, educational, etcetera—for attending theatre. Patrons will be asked to approach the figure that most represents what they see as the most significant purpose of theatre and to register their votes accordingly. Each actor will have a brief prepared script, which she or he will deliver, if asked by individuals or small groups to explain his or her purpose, but there will be no public contest. We thought public speeches might influence the audience unduly; that is, the actor with the most persuasive speech might sway the vote towards her or his purpose. We will apprise the audience of the results in an insert in the program of the next production and on the WCT website. A page in the program providing background to “It’s Your Cue: The Audience Show” will also alert readers to these survey options.

Our hope in using these strategies in addition to the usual survey is that the novel and the visible elements of our activities will stimulate greater discussion about theatre and participation in our research. In addition, WCT’s standard audience survey is not administered to the Pavilion group, so theoretically it remains “untested,” but because Pavillion show attendees appear to form a demographic

that is quite distinct from the Sagebrush group, their opinions on theatre are particularly important to engage. We will, therefore, administer our standard written paper survey to the Pavilion audience as well.

In preparing this paper, I have become increasingly aware of the possibilities—indeed the necessity—for extending our visual research beyond not only the conventional theatrical venue, as Bennett suggests, but also beyond theatrical venues entirely. We intend to take our exhibit into the larger community and we are exploring such venues as coffee shops and shopping malls, where we hope also to employ the written public survey we use in the theatre venues. Nash and Garrett-Petts remind us of the gap between academic research and popular culture: “In academic discourse” visuals are frequently used “as reference points subordinate to the surrounding text. Elsewhere, outside the context of the academy, visual communication...takes on a principal role as a carrier of meaning” (127). We hope that “It’s Your Cue: The Audience Show” will take an important step toward closing that gap by presenting academic research in a visual manner to a wide audience.

Although theatre-generated audience response surveys have been ubiquitous over the past few decades, they are usually read only by theatre personnel. Our research attempts not only to generate fresh ways of generating research *about* audiences but also to interpret and deliver that research *to* audiences. The final stroke in our research loop is to use the visual delivery of existing research as a means to encourage further responses. We are following Bennett’s belief that going beyond conventional approaches to audience surveys “might not only add in significant ways to theatre histories of the twenty-first century, but also promote collaborative engagement genuinely useful to external user communities, and, with luck, perhaps surprise us in thinking, again, about the theatre audience” (Bennett, “Theatre Audiences Redux”).

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