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“A big part of my life”: A qualitative study of the impact of theatre

Ben Walmsley

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper explores the impact that theatre can have on its audiences, both immediately and over time.

Methodology

The article evaluates the existing literature on impact and critically reviews a number of benefits models. Through a textual analysis of 42 semi-structured depth interviews, the paper deconstructs the concept of impact and rearticulates it in audiences' terms.

Findings

Impact emerges as a personal construct articulated by audiences in terms of emotion, captivation, engagement, enrichment, escapism, wellbeing, world view and addiction. Impact is ultimately described as a relative concept, dependent on audience typology and perceived by audiences in holistic terms, incorporating both intrinsic value and instrumental benefits. While catharsis is confirmed as a key enabler of impact, flow emerges as both an enabler and a benefit in itself.

Limitations

As this is a qualitative study with a sample of 42, the results are not representative of theatre audiences in general. Future research might test the findings of this study in a larger, quantitative survey, which might also test the relationships between the emerging variables.

Value

The originality of this study lies in its audience-focussed approach. Impact has tended to be constructed from the perspective of producers, marketers and academics, whereas this study invites audiences to describe it in their own, authentic vernacular. These authentic insights are of value to academics, producers, policy advisors, funders and marketers working in the arts, because they help shed light on why people attend the arts and the benefits they derive from them.

Keywords: impact, theatre, audiences, arts benefits, arts marketing.

Classification: Research paper

Introduction

Every art contributes to the greatest art of all, the art of living (Brecht, 1964).

Theatre-going is a complex pursuit that transcends the blurred boundaries of arts, entertainment and leisure. It is therefore unsurprising that audiences' motivations for going to see a play vary enormously, from spiritual engagement at one extreme to a good night out at the other (Walmsley, 2011). As White and Hede (2008, p. 32) point out: "The impact of art is a complex and multilayered concept that is experienced and understood in a variety of ways contingent on each individual's experience and perspective". This variance and subjectivity perhaps explain the persistent lack of insight that we possess into the impact that theatre can have on audiences. While Belfiore and Bennett (2008) have produced a seminal study on the social impact of the arts, and a small number of benefits frameworks have been modelled in recent years (Brown, 2006; White and Hede, 2008; McCarthy et al., 2004), there remains a significant gap in the academic literature on impact, particularly from a qualitative perspective.

This primary aim of this paper is thus to explore the impact that theatre can have on its audiences, both immediately and over time, through a qualitative study of theatre-going. As impact is such a complex, multilayered concept, there is no scope here for a full analysis of the wider social impacts of theatre. So as the main aim is to explore impact from the audience perspective, the focus will fall on the personal and intrinsic aspects of impact as articulated by theatre-goers themselves. The research questions have therefore been articulated as follows:

1. Is there any consensus in the literature on the immediate and cumulative impact of theatre on audiences?
2. What are the gaps in the literature on impact and what insight do benefits models provide?
3. How do theatre audiences articulate the impact that theatre has on their lives?
4. How does this compare with existing research and with theatre-makers' perceptions of impact?

Values, benefits and impact

The literature on the impact of the arts tends to equate impact with either benefits or value. While quantitative research has traditionally tried to measure impact in terms of instrumental benefits, qualitative enquiries take a softer, more intrinsic approach and focus more holistically on value. Value is inevitably harder to pin down than benefits, mainly because as a concept it is both more elusive and intangible. Despite attempts to classify consumption value (Holbrook, 1999), it has been argued that value is emergent rather than fixed or given; that as a dialectic of practice and its productions, it is "always under negotiation and in-the-making, and contingent on multiple experiences and expressions of inter-subjectivity" (Oliver and Walmsley, 2011, p. 88). Because value is a broader, more holistic concept, it tends to be assessed in social or public terms (for example, public funding in many countries is tied to evidence of 'public value'), whereas benefits are usually perceived as accruing to the individual. So the literature on impact creates two false dichotomies, distinguishing value from benefits and dividing impact into intrinsic and instrumental. This raises the question of whether audiences perceive impact in such dualistic terms. If not, then the literature is guilty of reductionism.

Many claims have been made about the transformative power of the arts and arts organisations often pepper their mission statements with aims of transforming individuals and communities. Pine & Gilmore (1999, p. 165) invoke the transformational aspect of performance events as follows: "when you customize an experience you change the individual". This idea is developed by Hover and van Mierlo (2006, quoted in Getz, 2007, p. 181) who identify three levels of experience (basal, memorable and transforming), defining a transforming experience as one which affects "durable change on a behavioural or attitudinal level". As Gobert (2006) reminds us, this visible change in behaviour (or praxis) was the very telos of Brecht's epic theatre, which not only imbued drama with the power to effect social change, but used this as its benchmark. This view was shared by Sartre and the existentialists, who demanded political engagement from their heroes and audiences alike. But as

Belfiore and Bennett (2008) point out, claims regarding the transformative power of the arts are almost impossible to substantiate.

The link between theatre and wellbeing is easier to substantiate, but the nature of this relationship has divided philosophers, playwrights and critics for centuries. While the Kantian view focuses on aesthetic pleasure, the Schopenhauer school regards the arts as a spiritual refuge, an escape from the unbearable anguish of the human condition and from the physical constraints of the human body (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). This existential anguish is staged to great effect in absurdist theatre, which reviled the notion of theatre as transforming, and although some absurdist writers (like Beckett) sought merely to confront their audiences with the pain of the human condition, others (such as Ionesco) saw theatre also as a rare form of solace from it.

Catharsis and flow

Other traditional approaches to evaluating impact come in the complex constructs of catharsis and flow. Catharsis is a controversial concept, the precise interpretation of which has triggered centuries of critical debate. The dominant view of catharsis has been the purgation theory, which holds that tragic drama can arouse emotions of pity and fear in an audience, which it then quells or purges in the resolution. Butcher (quoted in Bennett, 1981, p.207) elucidates the concept further, describing the “emotional cure” wrought by the alleviation of pity and fear, which are “artificially stirred” in the audience and then “universalized” to lift spectators out of themselves into a state of “sympathetic ecstasy”. There is a resonance here with Falassi’s typologies of ritual, where the rite of purification is identified as “a cleansing, or chasing away of evil” (1987, pp. 4-6). This interpretation of catharsis provides the basis for claims regarding the therapeutic benefits of the arts.

But there remains strong opposition to the purgation theory. According to Golden (1973, p. 473), there are three main schools of thought here: those who see catharsis as a “moral purification”; those who perceive it as a “structural purification in which the development of the plot purifies the tragic deed of its moral pollution”; and a third group (including Golden) who recognise the concept as “a form of intellectual clarification in which the concepts of pity and fear are clarified by the artistic representation of them”. The moral purification argument, based on the view that theatre encourages personal growth and moral rectitude, has been employed for centuries to justify state funding (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008).

Modern commentators tend to favour the third interpretation, although some argue that clarification derives from emotions rather than the intellect. This school of thought follows Scheff (1979) and Nussbaum (1986), who argue that catharsis works by encouraging audiences to project their emotions onto stage characters, resulting in a physical reaction (laughing or crying) which releases them from the hold of these emotions. This reading of catharsis also fits with the apparent goal of hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982), which Santoro and Troilo define as “a combined response from the emotions, senses, imagination, and intellect”, claiming that consumers engage in hedonic activity to create an “absorbing experience” (Radbourne et al., 2009, p. 18).

Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow is particularly significant in the context of absorbing experiences, as it encapsulates audiences’ often expressed desire to be ‘lost in the moment’ or ‘lose track of time’. Like catharsis, flow attempts to deconstruct the process of impact and Csikszentmihalyi defines it as an autotelic, optimal experience, which is “rewarding in and of itself” (1988b, p.8). He provides a range of phenomenological explanations to qualify this claim, including the links between flow and self-improvement, self-congruence, self-harmony, escapism and timelessness. Because self-congruence is heightened during moments of optimal experience, the pursuit of flow becomes “one of the central goals of the self” (1988a, p.24), the apotheosis of its strivings and pursuit of wellbeing.

Flow encapsulates core themes from a wide body of literature focusing on the value and purpose of the arts or leisure experience. Inspired perhaps by the theory on both catharsis and flow, Dewey credits the arts with providing exemplary, “clarified and intensified” experiences, free from the

distractions of everyday life (1980, p. 46). In a phrase reminiscent of Turner's (1982) 'sacred' or 'dramatic' time, Gadamer (1986) equates the artistic experience with 'fulfilled time', which perhaps foreshadows Stebbins' (2007) concept of 'serious leisure'. Belfiore and Bennett go even further, suggesting that flow is the very pinnacle of value: "the value of the arts resides in our complete commitment and absorption when creating or enjoying a work of art" (2008, p.97). This hypothesis was confirmed in Brown and Novak's recent study of the intrinsic impacts of live performance, where captivation indeed correlated most highly with satisfaction, representing the "lynchpin of impact" (Brown and Novak, 2007, p. 11). To the delight of producers, programmers, ethnographers and sometimes even audiences themselves, flow is often visibly manifest in the spectator: "Through their facial expressions, body language and audible reactions, audiences communicate impact as it is happening. There is no mistaking the silence of rapture during a concert, the moments of shared emotion in a theater when the plot takes a dramatic twist or the post-performance buzz in the lobby. All are reliable evidence of intrinsic impact" (Brown and Novak, 2007, p. 5).

Benefits models

In the past decade, there has been a revival of interest in the intrinsic, as opposed to instrumental, benefits of the arts. At the forefront of this movement was McCarthy et al's (2004) *Gifts of the Muse*, which aimed to reframe the debate on the benefits of the arts. It achieved this by reviewing the totality of arts-related benefits, illustrating the relationship between private and public benefits and dichotomising them into intrinsic and instrumental benefits. On the instrumental side, McCarthy et al placed educational, health, economic and social capital benefits; on the intrinsic side appeared captivation, pleasure, cognitive growth, increased capacity for empathy, and enhanced social understanding and bonding.

Although a useful departure point, the model failed to illustrate the process by which audiences acquire these benefits and overlooked the complex interrelationships between them. It also disregarded widely acknowledged goals and processes of value such as self-fulfilment, catharsis, transformation and wellbeing. However, the authors' declared intention was to spark a policy debate rather than provide a comprehensive toolkit and Brown (2006) extended the model in an attempt to encapsulate the arts experience more fully. This new framework mapped a range of arts benefits by value cluster, which Brown divided as follows: imprint of the arts experience; personal development; human interaction; communal meaning; and economic and social benefits. As the focus here is on the personal and intrinsic impact of theatre, the most relevant of Brown's clusters are first three, where Brown includes the following benefits: inspiration, empowerment and renewal; emotional reaction, stimulation and flight; aesthetic growth, self-improvement and self-actualisation; improved social skills, better relationships and family cohesion (Brown, 2006, p. 21). By focusing on cognitive, aesthetic, emotional and social impacts, Brown endorses Holbrook's consumption value matrix, which has also been effectively applied to street theatre (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006).

Acknowledging the limitations of his model, Brown advocated further research into the connections between benefits and enablers, and White and Hede take up this challenge, defining an enabler as "a factor that facilitates the occurrence of impact" (2008, p. 27). Their model, replicated in Figure 1, illustrates the various dimensions of the impact of art. Unlike the previous models, it combines individual and collective impact, depicting the blurred lines between the personal and social benefits of the arts. The inner circles omit the concept of flow but otherwise reflect the main themes from the literature – wellbeing, social bonding, aesthetic growth, catharsis, self-improvement and empathy. But whereas the previous frameworks isolated impact into discreet clusters of benefits, White and Hede's model portrays impact as a ripple effect, emanating outwards from the core artistic experience. Their model marks a significant development in the research by incorporating the fields of theatre and performance studies, aesthetics, ethics, hedonics and marketing. But the biggest strength here is the introduction of the realm of enablers, which shed further light on how impact is accrued.

Figure 1: Circumplex of impacts and enablers of the impact of art



Source: White and Hede (2008, p. 27).

Benefits models are useful in raising questions rather than providing answers and they have informed the current enquiry significantly. But by reducing the complex realm of value to measurable benefits and outputs, they fail to fully represent theatre experiences as situational and relational – i.e. as “social and spatial contexts that variously contain the dialectic or embeddedness of process and product and of experience and value” (Oliver and Walmsley, 2011, p. 95). This shortfall highlights the need to move beyond bounded models of impact and take a more reflexive approach by assessing impact on its own terms and in the audience’s own vernacular.

Enablers of impact

There exists some consensus in the literature regarding the psychology of cultural consumption. In his analysis of rituals, Arnold van Gennep identified three stages of cultural consumption: pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal. Turner (1969) links the concept of liminality with a “detached state of being associated with ritual” (Getz, 2007, p. 178), claiming that in this state of detachment, participants are relaxed, removed from their everyday identities and therefore more open to suggestion. Turner collectivises this state in the concept of ‘communitas’, a shared state of liminality which delivers communal experience and meaning.

Brown and Novak’s research into the intrinsic impacts of live performances also culminated in the delineation of a 3-stage process – anticipation » captivation » intrinsic impacts – and found that the single best predictor of captivation was positive expectation or “readiness-to-receive” (Brown and Novak, 2007, p. 10-11). This research is supported by Radbourne et al’s findings, which linked prior knowledge to a “richer experience” (2009, p.20), and by Pitts’ (2005) qualitative research of a chamber music festival, which demonstrated how audiences’ anticipation can be enhanced by pre-show activities such as introductory talks, which set the scene, provide a context and create a sense of

empathy between the performers and the spectators, drawing them into the action and opening up the “communication loop” (p. 260).

White and Hede’s model of impact delineates enablers under three headings: opportunity, resonance, and experience. The opportunity enabler reflects the marketing mix – the relationship between the audience and the artistic product in terms of price, location and distribution; the resonance enabler considers personal and community identification with a work of art; and the experience realm covers the three areas of context, environment and form, thus incorporating Brown and Novak’s (2007) “readiness to receive” construct as well as the physical and social packaging (the venue, audience and augmented product) and the presentation of the artistic product itself. Since the experience enabler is most closely connected to personal and intrinsic impact, it is worth briefly exploring it further. Although limited research has been published on impact enablers per se, there is a growing body of literature on the role of the venue in enhancing the audience experience (Mencarelli and Pulh, 2006; Mackintosh, 1992). Bennett (1997) touches briefly on the enabling role of marketing and established theatre rituals such as the stage curtain and applause, and credits these as vital elements in shaping anticipation and the decoding or meaning-making process.

Because catharsis and flow explore how impact is transferred and accrued by audiences, they too can illuminate the role of enablers. A consensual reading of catharsis theory might conclude, for example, that plays which elicit strong emotional reactions from audiences generate the greatest impact. Regarding flow, much has been written on how this privileged state of consciousness is enabled and disabled. Csikszentmihalyi (1988a) cites deep concentration and social norms and structures as enablers, denouncing their opposites as “noise” and “psychic entropy” (p.22). An obvious example of the latter in the theatre context would be distractions in the auditorium, which frustrate theatre-goers’ goals of engaging emotionally in a play and losing themselves in the action.

But overall, the literature on audience interaction and its role in enabling impact is sparse. Research into theatre audiences has traditionally been divided between performance theory, semiotics and reception theory, and there is now an acknowledged need for new discourses to explore how plays engage and impact upon audiences (Bennett, 1997; Brown, 2006). This call echoes Mitchell’s call to find new means of expression to articulate the flow phenomenon, as applied to the “soft, fragile subjectivism of artistic appreciation” (Mitchell, 1988, p.51). The aim of the forthcoming enquiry is therefore to seek out a new discourse in the form of a dialectic which regards impact in a more holistic way by synthesising instrumental benefits with intrinsic value and exploring the academic constructs of catharsis and flow in the authentic language of the audience.

Methodology

As Matarasso (1996, p.15) points out, “the art of evaluation lies in ensuring that the measurable does not drive out the immeasurable” and one of the main challenges for this study was to discern a methodology that would enable the immeasurable to emerge. According to Rubin & Rubin (2005, p.242), qualitative research emphasises “nuanced, context-dependent analysis that almost by definition precludes a standardised and uniform approach”. As the primary aim of this study was to elucidate the subjective concept of impact, a qualitative approach was selected.

The guiding principles of the research methodology were borrowed from ethnography, grounded theory and guided introspection (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). Following ethnographic principles, the study took an iterative-inductive approach and methods employed comprised a range of qualitative techniques including responsive interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and participant observation.

Sampling took place as follows: to counter cultural bias and specificity, research was conducted both in the UK and in Australia. Two comparable organisations were selected: Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) and West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP). Participants at both theatres were self-selecting: at MTC, the research project was announced to subscribers at two post-show discussions

and a direct appeal was made for volunteers. At WYP, all online bookers for two of the season’s main productions were contacted with a similar appeal for participation.

In order to elicit authentic and unprompted descriptions of how audiences conceive of impact, the following basic interview questions were formulated:

- How often do you attend theatre per year?
- What was your first memorable experience of theatre and how did it affect you?
- What do you hope to get from going to the theatre?
- What do you do before and after seeing a play?
- Do you tend to remember or re-live certain scenes or moments?
- What kind of plays tend to affect you most?
- What’s the best play you have ever seen and why?
- How important would you say theatre is to your life?
- How different would your life be without theatre?
- What other activities would you equate with the experience you get from theatre?
- Have you ever felt “transformed” by a piece of theatre?

These questions were based around the key themes in the literature and aimed to explore impact in a holistic sense, teasing out audiences’ perceptions of tangible benefits, intangible value and the process of impact accrual. As the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, the questions were nuanced, tailored and enhanced by probes and follow-ups to obtain the necessary detail, depth and thick description (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

In addition to audience interviews, eight interviews were conducted with staff members from the two venues, including artistic directors, general managers and marketing managers. The inclusion of professional theatre workers was designed to provide a comparative insight into impact and fill an acknowledged methodological gap in sampling from both the artist/producer population and from audience groups (Bergadaà and Nyeck, 1995). In both venues, interviews were conducted until a point of saturation, where emerging theories were being reconfirmed (Arnould and Price, 1993).

In total, 42 semi-structured, open-ended depth interviews were conducted: eight with professional theatre workers and 34 with audience members, with participants ranging in age from 17 to 77 years. The socio-demographic profile of the audience participants is displayed in Table 1:

Table 1: Profile of audience participants

Country of residence	Gender	Age	Education
UK =18	Male = 12	Under 20 = 1	School leaver = 10
Australia = 16	Female = 22	20-29 = 4	Degree = 16
		30-39 = 3	Higher degree = 8
		40-49 = 5	
		50-59 = 5	
		60-69 = 14	
		70-79 = 2	
Total = 34	Total = 34	Total =34	Total = 34

Interviews were all conducted by the same researcher and averaged just over one hour each. Detailed transcription notes were taken during every interview and observation, which resulted in over 50 hours of data. This data was then processed, anonymised and coded using NVivo, which facilitated the emergence of key themes and concepts. The use of qualitative software assisted in reorganising the data and in presenting it in different ways. This process encouraged a degree of distance from the

original data, which in turn supported researcher reflexivity and the emergence of “an etic voice that explicates deeper cultural meanings” (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993, p. 352).

Findings and discussion

Impact emerged as an almost omnipresent factor in the pursuit of theatregoing. Whether discussing reasons for attending, formative and best experiences or reactions to plays in general, respondents regularly used terms such as ‘impactful’ and epithets like ‘powerful’ and ‘hard hitting’. When asked specifically about the impact of theatre on their lives, participants responded in a variety of ways, depending on their motivations for attending. At one extreme, theatre-goers who sought light entertainment or a night out with friends were often stumped or even embarrassed by the question. More regular attenders, who admitted to seeking a deeper engagement, often became emotional, and struggled to picture a life without theatre. A basic conclusion here was that audience members with the deepest expectations reaped the highest value from their experience, so that impact became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As impact was articulated by participants in so many variations, the following discussion will be divided into seven key themes.

i) Flow

There was significant evidence of flow, with respondents providing rich insights into its processes and purpose. Flow appeared to be closely linked with Turner’s concepts of liminality and *communitas*, and pre-liminal behaviour was described in both collective and individual terms. A retired English teacher from Leeds expressed her pleasure at seeing an audience reach “a pitch of anticipation” before a play, while a 44-year-old sustainability consultant from Melbourne admitted to meditating for two minutes before a play to “clear her mood”, take in her surroundings and immerse herself in any pre-show visuals, sound or activity. Although on the extreme side of pre-liminal activity, this behaviour clearly illustrates the significance of Brown and Novak’s ‘readiness-to-receive’.

Flow was regularly discussed in terms of escapism and immersion. For example, a Lecturer in Education from Melbourne expressed her behaviour as follows: “All day I’ve been aware I’ve been going to the theatre tonight. I don’t take anything in with me; I leave it all at the door. It’s my time. I walk in; at the end I walk out and switch on my mobile. I immerse myself... I can’t have a busy mind.” There were many references to losing track of time, with several respondents judging a good play by whether they looked at their watch, lost consciousness of their surroundings and became “part of the play”. Three audience members even described the theatre as another world. As one Australian school teacher put it: “I just love being in the theatre and in that world, so I escape for two or three hours and immerse myself in that particular world for the time”.

One retired couple reflected Schopenhauer’s belief that the arts provide an escape from the human condition by declaring that theatre “gets us out of ourselves”, and a married mother of two proclaimed: “It’s a relief to be taken out of the reality of life for a while.” When asked about the best productions they had seen, many participants made an unprompted reference to flow: there was a general consensus that good productions “really draw you in” with a retired IT manager describing flow as “those moments when theatre really works and you’re immersed in it, totally absorbed in it – there’s no other medium like it.” A retired Melbourne teacher recalled being “mesmerised” by an RSC production of *King Lear* in 1957, while others focussed on collective flow – describing scenes “where you could have heard a pin drop” and moments of “laughing together, gasps or stunned silences”. Such vignettes embody the visible evidence of impact described in the literature and they were confirmed through audience observation at both venues.

ii) Distraction

Flow was evidently a desired goal of a small majority of participants, which supported Belfiore and Bennett's claim that the value of the arts lies in absorption and perhaps explains the general ambivalence towards fellow audience members that emerged in the research. Audiences were variably described as enablers of or barriers to impact. Many respondents expressed irritation about "bad behaviour" and noise, reflecting Csikszentmihalyi's theory on psychic entropy, while others regarded the wider audience as partners in a shared experience. A recurrent statement was that theatre audiences were "better behaved" and "more respectful" than cinema audiences because they understood "theatre rituals" and shared accepted "norms of behaviour". This common sentiment supported the theory that flow "typically occurs in clearly structured activities [...] such as ritual events" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988a, p. 30). Many respondents spoke of "zoning-in" to the stage, and the woman who meditated before a play spoke of her resentment of audience distraction and backstage noise, expressing her entitlement to optimise her experience.

iii) Catharsis and transformation

The biggest single motivator for theatre-going transpired to be emotional impact and several respondents confessed to seeking an "emotional release". When recalling a recent production of *The History Boys*, a retired English teacher from Leeds used the cathartic term "release" to describe the effect of the standing ovation at the end. Reflecting the moral purification interpretation of catharsis, a 32-year-old South African retail manager declared: "I'm a better person for having gone to the theatre that evening". But it was noteworthy that the only explicit mention of catharsis came from an artistic director, Sarah Esdaile. During rehearsals for *All My Sons* at West Yorkshire Playhouse, Sarah described the requiem scene as providing a "release" for the audience, the "all-important cathartic moment". When asked about what reaction she'd like to elicit in the audience, Sarah confided that her goal was to "achieve emotional impact" and make grown men cry. This was apparently based on her experience as an audience member at an American production of the play, where men were "sobbing in their seats" at the end. Participant observation confirmed that men and women alike were emotionally moved by the play. This intense emotional reaction to theatre confirmed the existing theory on hedonic consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982; Radbourne et al., 2009)

There was sparse evidence of the self-improvement benefits apparent in all three benefits models. The only references to cognitive growth credited theatre with "feeding the imagination" and providing "personal insight". Transformation, too, was scarcely mentioned by participants, although one Media Studies student at Melbourne University described her favourite production as "an almost life-changing experience".

iv) Wellbeing and long-term impact

Wellbeing is another intangible, subjective concept – perhaps an umbrella term for the accumulation of other positive impacts – and participants accordingly described it in many different ways. Many younger participants described theatre as "a release from work", while a retired primary school teacher from Teesside spoke about the "buzz" he gets from theatre because it "gives me a lift, regenerates the batteries [and] pulls me away from the mundane". This acknowledgement of theatre as a positive escape from the everyday echoed Schopenhauer's view of the arts as a spiritual refuge. Indeed for some, even the anticipation of attendance seemed to trigger feelings of wellbeing: a retired couple shared their sense of anticipation about their monthly trip to MTC, describing their subscription as a "highlight in their diaries". This intimates that the impact of theatre occurs far beyond the auditorium, and another example of what might be termed affiliated impact came from an Australian nurse who spoke about going on "pilgrimages" to London to see famous British actresses on stage and queuing to meet them afterwards. This fan-based activity evidently added huge value to her life and she exhibited great pride in these encounters, remembering clearly what the actresses had said to her, what they were wearing and how they behaved.

The long-term impact of theatre on people's lives was described in depth by participants and was reflected also in their post-liminal behaviour. Over half of the respondents admitted to keeping programmes, tickets or even theatre diaries as mementos of their theatre experiences and some spoke eloquently about the way theatre impacted their lives. A retired primary school headmaster in Leeds expressed this as follows: "Theatre deepens the quality of my life ... it's an enriching experience. I think about it a lot afterwards: these plays stay in your memory bank for years." This evidence of decoding and reflection supported the existing literature on rituality and post-liminal behaviour (Turner, 1982; van Gennep, 1960) and the confirmation of longitudinal impact was echoed by a the nurse, who felt that the impact of theatre on her life was cumulative, rather than immediately life-changing: "theatre adds to life in such a little way that it's sometimes imperceptible".

v) Relationship building

Participants confirmed Brown's (2006) finding that the arts can improve relationships and family cohesion. Many respondents felt that theatre provided a shared memory bank and ideal opportunities to spend quality time with a partner. As one arts worker from Leeds expressed it, theatre can "jog the memory and cement relationships [...] like a holiday or a house". For others, it was more about sharing the immediate experience: the sustainability consultant, for example, declared feeling "on a high" following her best experiences and even returning with her husband to see a play again because "I want him to get what I got from it".

A brother and sister, who were interviewed separately, admitted that theatre lay at the core of their family culture, providing a catalyst for spending "dedicated time" together (a concept reminiscent of Gadamer's (1986) 'fulfilled time'). As the brother lives outside Melbourne, theatre is the only time the family gets together apart from big occasions; he admitted that theatre was "a massive unifying force" in the family and couldn't imagine anything that could replace it: "movies and dinners wouldn't inspire me to come down".

vi) World view

Edutainment emerged as the second most common motivation for theatre-going, with over a third of respondents declaring that theatre enriches their lives by broadening their world view. The Media Studies student commented that "theatre is a way to learn something about the world and your place within it", while the South African retail manager confided that "theatre opened up a whole new world". This aspect of impact confirmed the benefits of transmission and social understanding discussed in the literature. Another recurrent value lay in audiences having their belief systems challenged by a play. The sustainability consultant, for example, described theatre as "confronting", while others felt that it kept them in touch with a rapidly changing world.

vii) Life without theatre

In order to probe audiences' personal perceptions of impact, all participants were asked to describe their lives without theatre, with responses varying from a casual shrug to a tearful reflection. Towards this latter extreme, many participants again referred to world view and the communal value of live theatre. In the words of a 66-year-old funeral director: "I'd have to find a new way of learning and hearing what people in other countries are saying. I'd probably do it through reading, but I'd not like to do it in isolation. I need other people to bounce ideas off." The vast majority of respondents said they would try to find "replacements" – generally literature, television drama and cinema – but most opined that there was nothing quite as powerful as the live experience. The Melbourne-based nurse specified that she'd miss "the storytelling and being part of a special community" and in a similar vein, the retired English teacher from Leeds responded that theatre "adds to my quality of life. It's a shared social event, which gives you scope for thought on issues that you maybe thought you had answers to [...]. Theatre is as good as it gets".

Of all the questions, this final one prompted the most eloquent and emotional responses and the most insightful articulations of impact came in the following vignettes. A sixty-year-old Londoner said she would be “devastated and heartbroken” without theatre in her life. She finds modern life quite fragmented, so the shared experience of theatre is becoming increasingly significant. A former teacher from the Yorkshire Dales replied: “It would diminish my life [...] there would be a big hole in my life”, and two participants simply couldn’t picture their lives without theatre. The sustainability consultant was almost tearful at the prospect, declaring: “I’d have to get the engagement from somewhere else”; and an Australian drama teacher confessed: “I’d be devastated; something would be lacking in my life – I’d have withdrawal symptoms.” This reaction reflected the recurrent description of theatre as “an emotional hit” and again confirmed the theory on hedonic consumption.

The young arts worker in Leeds replied that life without theatre would be “horrible”, that she would miss “the shared, live experience with strangers and with the people you’ve gone with. Theatre makes an ordinary day a more exciting day, a special event. I notice a difference in myself if I haven’t been for a while. It’s a bit like an experience fix. It would be easy to forget to go, but there’s a part of you that isn’t being fulfilled.” The Media Studies student became jittery at the thought, responding that she might very well become suicidal, confiding: “Theatre is a special, beautiful, personal part of my life. I don’t feel judged and I don’t have to explain myself to anyone. In my life, not many people have got me.” An equally personal insight came from the Education Lecturer in Melbourne, who spoke movingly of the “inspiration, support and reflexivity” she receives from theatre: “Theatre plays a very big part of my life. [Without it] I’d feel like I’d lost part of the support system of my life, it would make me feel isolated, like if someone said I can’t ever read books again. How would I communicate with that that wide world? It would narrow my experience of relating with people I might never otherwise have the opportunity to relate to.”

Implications and conclusions

This qualitative study has produced rich insights into the immediate and cumulative impact of theatre and expressed it in the authentic language of audiences. The aim of the research was to find a new discourse, a dialectic which might articulate impact in a more holistic way; the participants’ responses have achieved this by expressing impact through personal stories and reflections which make no distinction between value and benefits and confirm the principles of hedonic consumption.

The findings of the study reflect many key themes in the literature, although there was scarce evidence of transformation. New perceptions of value also emerged, such as the affiliated impact of seeing famous actors, the role of anticipation and reflection, and the addictive nature of the theatre experience. The insights provided by the participants clearly indicate that two-dimensional models and frameworks can never capture the messy complexity and the interweaving value and benefits of audiences’ theatre experiences. Theatre has been shown to potentially have a powerful immediate impact on all types of audiences and a traceable cumulative impact on the lives of certain types of theatre go-ers, whose lives would clearly be diminished without it. Ultimately, impact has emerged as a self-fulfilling prophecy, a subjective concept dependent on audience typology.

There are significant implications here for theatre-makers and venues. From a marketing perspective, more sophisticated segmentation of audience databases could uncover audience groups whose anticipation needs to be stoked and for whom post-show activities would add the most value. These groups could be used as ‘value ambassadors’ to spread positive word of mouth about the impact theatre has on their lives. Venues and touring companies could also consider how to prepare audiences for impact more effectively and how to minimise distraction and facilitate audience interaction with artists and theatre-makers. Obvious solutions here are mood enhancing atmospherics and well trained front-of-house staff.

Although the sample was relatively large for a qualitative study, these conclusions are nevertheless limited in scope, and the key findings could benefit from being tested in a larger quantitative survey. The age profiles of the respondents were representative of wider theatre audiences and there was no

clear evidence of any cultural specificity at play in the results, so the findings could well form plausible hypotheses to be tested in a hypothetical-deductive study. Future research might also benefit from testing the relationships between typology and impact to determine, for example, to what extent motivation can predict the level and nature of impact. While catharsis was confirmed as a key enabler of impact, flow emerged as both an enabler and a benefit in itself. A future study might therefore also explore how theatres could enhance the potential for flow to maximise audience impact.

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