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Co-creating theatre: Authentic engagement or inter-legitimation?

Abstract

This article investigates the development, purpose and value of co-creation in theatre. Through a qualitative analysis of a new work festival at West Yorkshire Playhouse, it explores the levers and barriers to participatory engagement and evaluates the phenomenon of co-creation from the comparative perspective of both producers and audiences of theatre.

The rising trend of co-creation reflects the evolving role of the audience in the creative process and at first sight represents a movement towards democratizing the arts. Co-creation is one of the deepest and most intensive ways audiences can engage with the arts, and this study questions to what extent it can be regarded as an authentic and successful democratization of the creative process, while exploring the contentious relationship between widening participation and artistic excellence.

The study takes a qualitative approach, based on participant observation and twelve depth interviews with a sample drawn from managers, theatre-makers, marketers and audiences. Its key findings are that co-creation attracts a highly niche audience of “theatre people” who are active learners and risk takers, and that while an all-encompassing definition of co-creation remains elusive, the activity is here to stay. Co-creation is ultimately messy, raw, incomplete, contingent and context-dependent. Successful co-creation involves trust, respect, collaboration, playfulness and exchange; it takes participants on an adventurous journey and deepens their engagement with theatre.

The implications of this study are as follows: Producers and artists should engage authentically with participants and explore ways to develop their co-creative skills; marketers should utilize experiential marketing techniques to emphasize the different, fun, risky and edgy aspects of co-creation; and policymakers should not rely on co-creation to widen participation and democratize the arts, but accept that it can deepen engagement for a select few.

Key words: Co-creation; artistic engagement; arts participation; relational art; theatre audiences; cultural value.

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Introduction

The rising trend of co-creation reflects the evolving role of the audience in the creative process. At first sight, co-creation represents a movement towards democratizing the arts through a process where creativity is demystified and opened-up to participant engagement. In recent years, it has been accompanied in the performing arts by the growing popularity of interactive theatre and dance, often referred to as immersive or relational performance. Given the popularity of these emerging art-forms, the lack of research into why audiences choose to engage with the arts in this participatory way, and the value they obtain from it, is striking. This lack of insight is not limited to the arts: relatively little is known about how customers contribute to the co-creation of value in general (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008).

No less surprising is the paucity of literature on the act of co-creation itself. This article aims to fill these acknowledged gaps in the literature by investigating the value of artistic co-creation as articulated by theatre-makers and -goers. Through a qualitative analysis of a new work festival at West Yorkshire Playhouse, which drew on aspects of co-creation to open-up and open-out the creative process, it will explore the levers and barriers to audience engagement and review the phenomenon of co-creation from the comparative perspective of producers and audiences of theatre.

The first objective will be to analyze existing definitions of co-creation, as the terminology surrounding the process can prove both ambiguous and misleading. Co-creation is one of the deepest and most intensive ways audience members can engage with the arts and this article will question to what extent co-creation can be regarded as an authentic engagement in and democratisation of the creative process. In so doing, it will explore the contentious relationship between cultural democracy and excellence and investigate Bourdieu's claim that culture can act as "an interminable circuit of inter-legitimation" (1984, p. 53). It will achieve this by questioning why artists and producers choose to open up their creative processes to audiences and by interrogating the aesthetic and instrumental value it adds to audiences' engagement with theatre.

Defining co-creation

Participatory arts cover a diverse range of activities across many art-forms, scales and budgets (Brown, Novak-Leonard & Gilbride, 2011). This diversity perhaps explains the authors' assertion that: "the terminology surrounding arts participation is in a state of flux. There is no generally accepted set of terms to describe arts participation, but an evolving lexicon of words and phrases that describe how people encounter and express their creative selves and share in the creativity of others" (ibid., p. 6). One of these words is 'co-creation', and based on research with over 100 organizations actively engaged in participatory arts, Brown et al. define the term as an activity where audience members "contribute something to an artistic experience curated by a professional artist".

This definition echoes Govier's description of co-creation as a "collaborative journey" that producers embark on with audiences in an attempt to create something new together (2009, p. 3). Govier's focus on novelty is also adopted by Ind, Fuller and Trevail (2012), for whom co-creation "suggests the interaction of individuals within a framework to evolve, re-define or invent something that is new". However, as we shall see, co-creation does not always culminate in something new, and Leadbeater's more generic and philosophical depiction of

co-creation as “the art of with” (2009, p.5) therefore seems more apt. This loose, collaborative conception is also espoused by Rudman, who champions co-creation as “a new form of ‘organizational porosity’ – a mindset that allows for a free exchange of creative energy between an arts organization and its public (as cited in Brown et al., 2011, p. 18).

However, some definitions of co-creation reveal the inherent ambiguity of the term. For example, in her attempt to integrate customer value with artistic objectives, Boorsma (2006) argues that co-creation is limited to the consumption phase of the artistic experience, where audiences decode and complete a work of art: “The art consumer should not be actively involved before the artistic idea has developed its form. After that, however, the art consumer’s role becomes crucial. Arts consumers play a central role as co-producers in the final stage of the art process by giving meaning to the artefact by means of their imaginative powers” (Boorsma, 2006, p. 85). This confusion reveals the lack of consensus on a definition of co-creation. However, the definitions provided in the literature do coalesce around a number of key ideas: collaboration, interaction, invention, experience, value and exchange. These ideas will be explored further in the following sections of the article.

Relational art and the rise of participation

Arvidsson (2008) argues that the progressive inclusion of consumers in the creation of value represents one of the most significant trends in contemporary society, while Leadbeater (2009) notes that cultural activity has undergone a seismic shift from production to or for audiences to creation with them. These assessments have almost become a truism, describing the defining features of a post-modern audience which engages in “active and expressive ways” to form a culture of “making-and-doing” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 4). Arvidsson links this trend with an oversupply of knowledge workers who have learnt to seek out self-expression and –realization through social production, while Payne et al. (2008) identify three concrete factors behind this shift: technological breakthroughs; changes in industry logics; and changes in customer preferences and lifestyles. In the performing arts, these factors can be seen in developments like live streaming (which has spurred initiatives such as National Theatre of Scotland’s 5-Minute Theatre); a focus on appealing to diverse and younger audiences (e.g. Contact theatre’s Freestyle Mondays); and personalized marketing.

But although co-creation is a relatively new concept in the arts, the participatory practices behind it are arguably as old as the arts themselves, which have a long and proud tradition of “viewer participation” and “activated spectatorship” (Bishop, 2006, p. 78). Indeed Boorsma (2006) contends that the notion of art as autonomous only appeared with the modernists and claims that post-modernism has regenerated a vision of the arts as “a product of social interaction” (p. 75). This relational view of art, she argues, accepts the evolution of arts consumers from passive recipients into active participants. The theory on relational art and performance was heavily influenced by Bourriaud’s (2002) concept of “relational aesthetics”, which has been defined as artistic endeavour based on human interaction in social spaces and linked with the Situationist belief that “art must move away from representation towards community and dialogue” (Debord, 1992; Overend, 2010, p. 2). Combining these notions of social participation and dialogue, Bishop maintains that relational art seeks “to establish inter-subjective encounters [...] in which meaning is elaborated collectively”.

It has been argued that relational art represents “part of a larger ‘participation economy’ in which social connection eclipses consumption” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 7). It is therefore all

the more surprising that arts marketers have generally failed to move away from the “romantic conception of art as an autonomous phenomenon” and persist in regarding artistic creation and marketing as independent tasks (Boorsma, 2006, p. 75). Influenced by the literature on hedonic consumption (e.g. Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook, 1999), Boorsma emphasizes the shift in the marketing focus from the product to the experience and reminds us that “unlike the utilitarian perspective, the hedonistic perspective emphasizes the dynamic interaction between consumer and product” (2006, p. 79). Activities such as co-creation present an ideal opportunity for hedonic consumption and experiential marketing. But to capitalize on this, marketers will need to appreciate fully the true purpose and value of co-creation.

The purpose of co-creation

Very little has been written about the targets and beneficiaries of artistic co-creation, but there is evidence that audience members with a background in an art-form are not just more likely to attend artistic performances, but also to prepare in advance and report higher levels of anticipation and impact (Brown et al., 2011). In this sense, impact can almost become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Walmsley, 2012). Although limited research has been undertaken into audience typologies, Brown and Ratzkin isolate six typologies of artistic engagement, the smallest and most deeply engaged of which, “active learners”, are said to seek out “making and doing engagement opportunities that offer a way into the art” (2011, p. 24).

This emerging evidence that co-creation might only appeal to a niche, pre-initiated audience segment challenges the general assumption in the arts that participation serves to broaden engagement and democratize artistic provision. For example, Holden (2010) argues that access to culture is one of the most effective tools for eradicating inequality, while others maintain that relinquishing control of a cultural project to participants can increase its relevance and impact (Arvidsson, 2008; Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2007). This ‘participation agenda’ is of course opposed by those such as McMaster (2008), who contend that the political focus on instrumental benefits in the UK has steadily eroded artistic excellence. However, this protracted debate, which is at the heart of many of the policy tensions within national funding agencies, is far from Manichaeian, as activities such as co-creation continue to blur and challenge the very terms of reference: “As artists collaborate, sample, remix and repurpose, they obscure the line between creator and observer and toy with fundamental presumptions of originality and authenticity that traditionally define artistic excellence” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 7).

So if the role of co-creation is to foster neither democratization nor excellence, what purpose does it serve? According to Payne et al., co-creation can provide “experiential interactions and encounters which customers perceive as helping them utilize their resources” (2008, p. 87). This in turn can create strategic opportunities for creating value, as long as producers align their creative processes with their audiences. So “planning for co-creation is outside-in as it starts from an understanding of the customer’s value-creating processes, and aims at providing support for better co-creation of value” (Payne et al., 2008, p. 89).

The value of co-creation

This understanding of audiences' value-creating processes is essentially what is missing from both the research and practice of co-creation. As Brown et al. put it, while "an international debate rages about the value of the arts [...] missing in this debate is a dispassionate, critical assessment of the relative benefits and value of participatory arts practice versus receptive participation" (2011, p. 10). While there is no room here for a thorough investigation of cultural value and impact, some of the key benefits of co-creation have been presented in the literature. From the audience perspective, benefits have been argued to include self-expression, self-realization, enhanced socialization, confidence and aesthetic insight together with improved creative thinking, communication and problem solving skills (Arvidsson, 2008; Brown et al., 2011).

From the producers' perspective, co-creation has been credited with maximizing the lifetime value of desirable customer groups (Payne & Frow, 2005); fulfilling the artistic mission (Boorsma, 2006); and developing "artistic exchange relationships" (ibid., p. 77). Indeed it has even been argued that value is compromised without some element of co-creation: "The assumption that artistic value can be realized autonomously, independently of the patronage of arts consumers, is no longer valid. Artistic value goes beyond the product in terms of its form" (Boorsma, 2006, p. 75). However, the overriding challenge in understanding and articulating the value of co-creation remains the lack of meaningful marketing evaluation: "Improved ways of measuring the delivery of customer value are required. Marketing metrics and measures should meaningfully assess the value co-creation potential of customer relationships" (Payne et al., 2008, p.89). In other words, if evaluators don't ask the right questions, they won't obtain meaningful answers. The following section presents a methodology aimed at solving this problem.

Methodology

Based on the findings of the literature review, this study set out to answer a number of research questions, which were articulated as follows:

1. What is co-creation and how can we define it?
2. What type of audiences does co-creation attract?
3. What are the main levers & barriers to co-creation?
4. What impact does co-creation have on audience engagement?
5. What other aesthetic, intrinsic and instrumental value can it have for audiences & artists?
6. What are the implications of the findings for arts organizations and cultural policymakers?

The study took a qualitative approach, employing the methods of participant observation and responsive depth interviews to elicit thick description and nuanced, context-dependent analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In order to provide a holistic overview, which encompassed both the supply and demand side of co-creation, the sample was drawn from directors, marketers, producers, theatre-makers and audiences engaged in a festival of new work at West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds.

The festival was branded as Furnace and was selected because of the co-creative approach it embraced in its vision, namely to create new work with performance makers and place artists and audiences "at the centre of the development and realisation of theatre" (West Yorkshire

Playhouse, 2011). The festival ran over one week in October 2011 and comprised three events: a “play-test” of *The Giant and The Bear* by Unlimited, a family show inspired by circus; *Original Bearings*, a site-specific bus tour of Holbeck by Slung Low; and a symposium exploring new ways of making theatre.

During the festival, the researcher engaged in one showing of each event as a participant-observer (O'Reilly, 2005). This participation was followed up by a series of depth interviews with twelve participants, comprising the Playhouse's chief executive, the festival producer, the marketing officer, the artistic directors of the two events and the seven audience members who responded to an email request for volunteers sent out to all the online bookers of the festival. This resulted in over ten hours of recorded interview data, which was transcribed and then coded against the key themes emerging from the literature review using the qualitative software analysis tool NVivo.

Findings

1. Aims and definitions of co-creation

When asked to describe their perceptions and experiences of co-creation, participants conjured up a spectrum of activity ranging from “under-rehearsed readings” to an “open stage”. This supported Brown et al.'s findings regarding the diversity of the participatory arts and their conclusions about the fluctuating terminology used to describe them. Slung Low's event was controversial in that it resembled a finished show rather than a work-in-progress. For director Alan Lane, the value lay in testing out the response of a whole community rather than working directly with participants in a more traditional co-creative format. As the company posted up signs and stories about the history of the area, Lane was primarily interested in the reactions of the people of Holbeck, and expressed a sense of accomplishment that “when the signs came down, people complained”.

Some of these aims were shared by the festival's producer, Amy Letman, who described her objectives in terms of “developing adventurous projects”; “taking audiences on a journey”; “trailing and testing work as we go along [and] tailoring the experience to what would be most profitable for the companies and for the piece of work that they're trialling”. So the festival was clearly artist-led and took a flexible approach to co-creating theatre experiences.

The other company invited to partake in the festival, Unlimited, actively places co-creation at the heart of its mission: “Unlimited's work is always co-created with equal partnership in the creative process and in collaboration [...]. At its heart is a sincere engagement with its audience both in the process and moment of (co)creation” (Unlimited, 2012). Director Jon Spooner described the company's creative process as a protracted “conversation” through which they actively foster “genuine agency” and seek out meaningful feedback.

This conception of co-creation seemed to chime closely with participants in the ‘play-test’, one of whom described her experience as follows: “We're being experimented on, and I'm quite happy with that: they're test-driving material, they're seeing what the response is, and how it works; and in a way that's maybe even more refreshing than actually going to see the finished piece, because you're important [...] it's more of a dynamic relationship.” Several significant insights are provided here. The first is the participant's awareness and acceptance of being used to test out new material. The second is the assertion that this form of participatory engagement

can actually be more “refreshing” and valuable than the final act of spectatorship. The third insight comes with the words “important” and “dynamic”, which describe the sense of worth and self-esteem that co-creation can confer on participants, and the balanced, two-way nature of the relationship between the artists and the participants. These insights confirm Arvidsson’s theory regarding the benefits of social production and echo the notions of collaboration, interaction and exchange inherent to relational art as well as Leadbeater’s “creation with”.

2. The target audience

It was perhaps no coincidence that four of the seven audience volunteers had either trained and/or practised as actors or arts workers. But still, when asked about their fellow participants, audience members generally reported feeling somewhat alienated. This alienation emerged from two distinct camps: the minority camp, who had not trained or worked in the arts, often felt conspicuous, incongruent or out of place; and the arts insiders, who felt they fitted in, but were saddened by the lack of diversity around them. A retired police officer noted that *Original Bearings* “was attended by a lot of students from the university and theatre people [...]. I think we were the only grey haired people, older people there.” Although he thoroughly enjoyed the experience, he contrasted it with the philosophy of West Yorkshire Playhouse under the leadership of Jude Kelly, which he took to be as follows: “This is your theatre, this is the community, it isn’t the actor’s theatre, it isn’t the staff’s theatre, it’s a theatre for you: come and use it for whatever you want to do.” This contrast was borne out in the interview with Letman, who admitted to making a conscious choice to target a certain typology of audience: “I kind of like how we were a bit more private about it this time [...] I actually handpicked people”.

The second form of alienation was encapsulated by a participant-artist who attended all three events in the festival and described his experience as follows: “I go to a *Slung Low* or an *Unlimited* show and it’s the same people [...] it’s an incredibly tight clique [and] we’re talking to ourselves”. This homogeneity was confirmed through the participant observation, which revealed on the whole established groups of white, young to middle-aged adults with pre-established relationships. The veiled charge of solipsism was also apparent in the symposium, with the thirty or so participants regularly exchanging views on first-name terms and collectively wandering off the topic. As one symposium participant expressed it: “There’s a reason why the hard to reach are hard to reach, and it’s because they’re hardly reached. [...] I think it’s a bit of an experiment that’s happening on the fringes of people who are arty and interested in that kind of dynamic”.

3. The role of the audience

All participants in the study were asked how they interpreted the audience’s role in the event(s) they attended. Unsurprisingly, this bemused those who had only seen *Original Bearings*, as this was perceived as a finished product, but a small minority did recognize the ancillary role of the community in the creative process. However, participants in *The Giant* and *the Bear* were highly conscious that they were able and encouraged to provide feedback: “You knew you were being listened to”. But not all participants were aware of the co-creative nature of the event until they actually arrived – which was complicated by the fact West Yorkshire Playhouse decided to charge for the event (against the wishes of the artists).

The differences in participants’ perceptions between the two theatre events were elucidated in interviews with the two directors: where Lane revealed an almost religious conception of his

audiences, declaring that their role was to “bear witness” to the company’s work, Spooner wanted his participants to “play wholeheartedly”, “dip your toes in” or “come along for the ride”. Letman provided perhaps the quintessential producer’s perspective in conceiving of the audience as a critical friend and censor: “Because the director is so in that world you need that outside world, like the editor, to go ‘this is how we make this brilliant’”.

4. The role of the artist or producer

Both directors emphasized the need to treat audiences with care and respect and they articulated a sense of anger against artists who engage in co-creation cynically or inauthentically. Spooner felt that theatre-makers needed to create a safe, playful environment for participants and broker the relationship carefully. He also opined that opening up the creative process should be a duty for subsidised companies: “I think closed rehearsal rooms are weird, I really do [...]. It’s for everyone.” For Spooner, a genuine and serious approach to co-creation also entails careful casting and recruitment: “There’s a really long, rigorous process to go through; I think a lot of people in organisations don’t value the process, it’s just about outcome and product.”

Revealing a similar focus on process, West Yorkshire Playhouse’s chief executive, Sheena Wrigley, used the term “porous” to describe the objectives of the festival, reflecting Rudman’s definition of co-creation as an exchange of creative energy enabled by organizational porosity. This congruence perhaps highlights the significance of transparency and inclusiveness as precursors and enablers of participatory engagement activities such as co-creation.

5. Value and benefits

When asked why they had attended the festival, none of the audience respondents knew or even reflected the aims of the festival in their responses; their motivation was generally to engage in something different, fun, live and risky. For one participant, the value of the experience lay in the extended live engagement with the art: “I really liked that rawness of it. All theatre is live, but this was more live than the theatre. [Co-creation] encourages audiences to have a long-term relationship with a particular piece of work; they are making an early investment, sort of emotionally and intellectually, in that piece of theatre.” Another participant focused on co-creation’s potential to generate truth and authenticity: “It’s a much braver, more open, more honest way of engaging”.

Some of the benefits articulated by participants were also shared by the artists, with Spooner, for example, praising the loyalty and relationship-building generated by successful co-creation: “It’s fun, it’s useful, it’s genuinely interesting. It’s great to actually meet your audience at different stages of the process, and I think you get advocates for the work, in a way that you wouldn’t otherwise [...]. It’s a great way of reflecting back to yourself where you’re at in the process”. According to Letman, co-creation can also serve a useful purpose for arts organizations in building new communities of practice and preventing theatres taking risks they shouldn’t take, acting as a control mechanism or early warning signal.

6. Challenges and barriers

In a period of declining funding and ageing theatre audiences, one symposium participant wondered whether co-creation was a justifiable priority for publically funded arts organizations:

“There’s still a massive amount to be done on how to engage people in the traditional theatre form”. This is not only a valid strategic marketing argument; it also supports Holden’s (2010) charge that the debate about the potential of culture to eradicate inequality is “deafening by its absence” (p. 3). This question of competing priorities presents an ongoing challenge for cultural leaders when deciding where to target their resources most effectively.

Other challenges and barriers are more pragmatic. From the practitioners’ perspective, however desirable as an end in itself, co-creation can cannibalize valuable rehearsal time: “It’s time-consuming; artists can feel like they’re losing time”. There is also the barrier of overcoming established rituals and audience reserve: one participant recalled an incident where “the audience were actually told by the actors they were allowed to react”. For marketers, the challenges revolve around the narrow appeal; the lack of a clear definition; and pricing, which is becoming an increasingly contentious issue as companies start charging for participation without clearly understanding or articulating its value.

From the participants’ perspective, co-creation can appear messy and unprofessional: “Some of it seemed a bit amateurish”. Amongst certain uninitiated participants, this type of perception could damage a company’s artistic reputation and dilute its brand. And co-creation is certainly not for everyone: echoing Lyng’s (2005) theory on ‘edgework’, one participant commented that: “People sometimes like the edge; others don’t.”

Discussion and analysis

As with the literature review, the primary research failed to find a consensus on the definition or process of co-creation, probably because there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Although there was some convergence in participants’ notions of co-creation, the activity emerged as messy, raw, incomplete, contingent and context-dependent. This raises significant challenges for artists, producers, marketers and audiences.

Co-creation can clearly thrill audiences and deepen their engagement while also providing useful feedback and authentic insights to help artists reflect on and develop their work. It was notable that the producer of *Furnace* saw her role as striking a balance between providing an adventure for audiences and supporting the creative objectives of artists. This suggests that to function most effectively, co-creation needs to satisfy both the supply and demand sides of artistic consumption. There was also a consensus that there is often too much focus on the end product, and Spooner’s call for a more holistic focus on the artistic process echoed the established theory of social production, whereby “managers need to keep in mind the prevalence of process over product. For most participants in customer co-production, similarly to other forms of social production, motivation is directly related to the pleasures that can be derived from community participation and contribution” (Arvidsson, 2008, p. 335).

Market segments such as Lyng’s (2005) ‘risk-takers’ and Brown and Ratzkin’s (2011) ‘active learners’ present perfect opportunities for targeted co-creation; but as highly literate “theatre people”, they represent neither an authentic opening-out of the creative process nor a democratization of the arts. Although this small, qualitative sample would never be statistically significant, co-creation was shown to appeal predominantly to an ultra niche segment of risk-takers, confirming Brown et al.’s description of the ‘active learner’ typology. As indicated in the findings, this niche appeal can alienate participants – even those who would describe themselves as the ideal typology for co-creation. There was thus an apparent tension in the study between an

artist-led approach, where producers benefit from a hand-picked audience of experts, and an audience-led approach, which fosters demystification and diversity. The former approach reflects Boorsma's (2006) point that co-creation demands specific skills from the consumer and Doyle's (2000) argument that a customer's value depends on his or her ability to contribute to organizational objectives. These views seem to jeopardize the future of audience-led co-creation, but certainly do not discount a compromise of artist-led but audience-focussed engagement.

Evidence from the depth interviews indicated that rather than democratize the arts, co-creation actually flirts very closely with solipsism and can even reinforce elitism. This has repercussions on both policy and practice, because as Jancovich argues: "Finding better ways to engage with the public is necessary, not only to increase the legitimacy of decision-making but also to ensure that artistic practice is less self-referential. A narrow band of voices militates against change and innovation" (2011, p. 279). This returns us to Bourdieu's critique on the "circuit of inter-legitimation" and begs the question of whether co-creation is a form of engagement that can legitimize artistic practice. In terms of audience development, co-creation can be seen to provide depth, but certainly not breadth. And this is not the only challenge facing the development of co-creation. In an era where arts organizations are being pushed into developing new business models and income streams (Bolton, Cooper, Antrobus, Ludlow & Tebbutt, 2011), it is tempting to regard participatory activities as a potential source of income, although initial evidence from this study indicates that this can alienate potential participants and confuse the authentic objectives of co-creation.

This exploratory study has indicated the need for further research into co-creative practice, which might make use of other viable methods such as quantitative surveys and content analysis of marketing materials. However, the findings of this study have some practical implications for both arts organizations and cultural policymakers. The feedback from participants suggests that producers and artists need to be clear and transparent about their objectives, engage authentically with participants and explore ways to develop audiences' co-creative skills. The evidence regarding levers indicates that marketers should utilize experiential marketing techniques to emphasize the different, fun, risky and raw aspects of co-creation. The core lesson for policymakers is undoubtedly that they should not rely on co-creation to widen participation or democratize the arts, but accept that this privileged type of collaboration can deepen audience engagement and improve both the creative process and the end product for producers and audiences alike.

Conclusion

Although an all-encompassing definition of co-creation remained elusive, common traits emerged to be collaboration, agency, interaction, invention, experience, value and exchange; and co-creation was described as a test-drive, a ride, a journey, an adventure, a conversation and a dynamic relationship. While variance regarding the public value of co-creation remains significant, perspectives on the role and purpose of participants seemed to coalesce around benefits of feedback, editing and providing an objective, external eye. The study also emphasized the duty of care and respect that participants require from artists, who in turn perceived of their own role as brokers and enablers of play.

Ultimately, co-creation must be acknowledged to be messy, raw, contingent and context-dependent. At best, it provides a platform for authentic engagement; at worst it can foster elitism and inter-legitimation. These characteristics raise significant challenges for producers, artists,

marketers, policymakers and even audiences, especially as experiential participation and hedonic consumption seem to be the preferred modes of engagement for many modern theatre-goers. Arvidsson (2008) attributes this trend to enduring communitarian values; and Boorsma (2006) warns arts organizations that if they wish to survive in the competitive global world of tourism and leisure, they will have to develop their audiences' capacity to co-create and deepen their engagement through increasingly 'entire' experiences.

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