

Triple Play: Focus Group Reports

Theatres:

PH: Playwrights Horizons

WM: Woolly Mammoth

AS: Arena Stage

CTG: Center Theatre Group

GT: Goodman Theatre

PT: Public Theater

CB: Cutting Ball

1. What was your experience with the process of conducting these focus groups? Is there anything we should know in order to contextualize the responses you received? For example, did you depart from the research guidelines in any significant way?

PH: The experience with the focus groups was extremely positive overall. Due to a small number of single ticket buyers for *Grand Concourse* and some logistical issues, we were only able to select 7 participants total (3 for the first group and 4 for the second). We cleared this with WolfBrown in advance to make sure our segmentation strategy could still work for the number of responses we received.

WM: It should be noted that Woolly Mammoth did not succeed in assembling focus groups of 6-8 single ticket buyers. The focus group selection parameters were challenging in part because of timing (our single-ticket buyers typically purchase one week or less before the performance), and partly because of our ticketing software (which did not consistently weed out subscribers and ushers from the pool of focus group survey recipients). As a result, we had one focus group of three (two of whom were subscribers) and one focus group of five (four of whom were subscribers). Additionally, the focus groups were demographically skewed: all subjects were female, and all but two were over 50. However, Woolly Mammoth exclusively produces new plays, so our subscribers presumably make a conscious choice to see new work as opposed to older material. We based our focus group discussions on this assumption, and adjusted some questions accordingly.

AS: Despite having a large audience base to pull from, it was somewhat of a challenge to find enough participants in the focus groups. We had 7 people attend the first focus group and four attend the second. The second group had six people signed up for it, but a pair of people dropped out within an hour of the focus group. Not able to find enough individuals to participate we allowed for guests of qualified applicants to attend as well. This allowed us to get our numbers up to acceptable levels but it also allowed people to join the focus group who had not necessarily been vetted by the focus group questionnaire. In one instance, the guest of an approved participant turned out to be someone who worked for a

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local theater (Shakespeare Theatre Company). So, the eleven participants were made up of four “couples” (either married, or boyfriend/girlfriend) and one father with his adult daughters. This familial relationships often led to partners whose responses were pretty much identical, since so much of their theater-going experience had been shared. The longer the couple had been together, the more likely the husband would defer to his wife’s responses. Attempts to lead with the husband often led to them turning to their wives for the “correct” response.

CTG: Our one focus group was particularly... focused. Only five people. One of whom was a respondent’s 14-year-old son who tagged along with his mom. The paucity of respondents was partly due to the fact that we were producing a world premiere at the Mark Taper Forum that unfortunately never caught on with audiences.

On the plus side, this meant that we were able to have a very relaxed and somewhat in-depth conversation sparked by the questions in the focus group template.

GT: My general experience was that people were more concise and straightforward than I expected. There was not much rambling. With both groups, I ended up finishing with quite a bit of time to spare, and ended up throwing out a couple more questions. This happened pretty organically, and I didn’t feel that it was a negative thing. We had a couple of no-shows with each group, so our first group was 6 people and the second group was 5.

PT: Only two participants attended one of the sessions. The conversation was more in-depth than expected since they were both able to respond more often.

CB: Cutting Ball issued over 50 invitations to the survey to people who purchased tickets to a preview performance of *Superheroes*, a world premiere play about the history of the crack-cocaine epidemic in the Bay Area, or who had purchased a ticket to a performance following the date of the focus group. We excluded anyone who was given a complimentary ticket. We only had 5 responses to our survey, and invited all respondents to participate. We had 3 people show up to the focus group. All three of the focus group participants had some experience as performing artists. Respondents included a woman, a man and a transgender person. Two of the three respondents were people of color.

2. What factors do the discussants consider when deciding what play to see? What sources of information inform their decisions?

PH: Across the board, our discussants zeroed in on price, press coverage (both features and reviews), and video/multimedia as strong contributing factors that affect their decision to purchase tickets to a play. Beyond those commonalities, each participant in the discussion

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also referenced knowledge of the producing organization, the playwright, word of mouth, direct mail, and the blurb/synopsis/subject matter, but these answers differed by participant.

AS: By and large, the women in the room had the more elaborate methods for the decision making process. They cited reading reviews, receiving promotional emails, word of mouth from friends, seeing advertising (direct mail, print, radio, TV and digital), visiting the webpage, watching promotional videos (there was a strong preference voiced for seeing part of the play in the video, which was echoed by another). One had an elaborate system for researching the shows at the top of each season by looking at multiple websites and sometimes Googling the history of the creative people involved in the show. Another woman (a former subscriber), gets together with friends at the top of each season with several theater brochures and they plot which shows they want to see that season.

A few couples expressed a sense of routine in the way they purchase plays, and in the way they experience them (always going through the same process to purchase tickets; always going with the same group of friends, etc.). This was especially true for the couple that had previously been Arena subscribers. There didn't seem to be a lot of spontaneity in people's ticket purchasing behaviors.

The men in the focus group, for the most part, relied on their partner or children to decide for them which show they would be seeing. If the show seemed appealing from their spouse's description, that was good enough for them. Although they also seemed prepared to go along to see a show that didn't necessarily appeal to them, if their partner really wanted to see it.

Regarding reviews, participants were all over the map. Many cited that reviews may affect their decision to attend the play while at the same time the same people would insist that if they wanted to see a play, a bad review would not dissuade them. Some cited that the reviewers' opinions seemed to rarely match their own, or cited that a good friend's opinion held more weight than that of a professional reviewer. One couple seemed fully aware that *The Shoplifters* had gotten a very poor review from *The Washington Post* (the one reviewer that we, as marketers, feel can affect the sales for a show), but since their friends had recommended the show, they didn't seem to care what the *Post* reviewer thought. They feel the reviewer is over-analytical and don't address whether or not the show is entertaining. ("They dissect the play and take all the joy out of it.") One woman appreciates the reviews but tries not to read them until after she's seen the play and formed her own opinions. One gentleman shared "I might look at a review to get a sense of the tone, but not the quality." Additionally, some people seemed to express more trust in reading preview articles than in reading reviews.

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CTG: On the whole, **it was interesting to note that the respondents wanted more information about a play not before they bought a ticket but rather after.** They were a little vague about exactly what prompted them to purchase a ticket. A couple of them love supporting new work and go out of their way to do that. One liked the subject matter as described to her by one of our salespeople. Most mentioned at least skimming the *L.A. Times* review. But they all seemed very casual in how they choose their plays.

GT: These varied significantly. In our focus group with ticket buyers for *The World Of Extreme Happiness*, which is a play that takes place in contemporary China, some bought tickets because of their interest in China. One woman was teaching a class on human identity and was going to bring her class to see it. Another woman had seen *Smokefall* already and mentioned that a conversation with a box office employee convinced her she should come back to see our other show. There was no review out yet, so nobody was swayed by critics.

In our focus group with ticket buyers for *Smokefall*, some people seemed to be drawn more to the Goodman itself, or were just looking for something to do in the city that night, rather than being attracted to the play. On the other hand, because we did a production of *Smokefall* last year in our smaller theater, some people had looked at reviews from last year and mentioned being swayed by that. (The reviews from this year were not out yet.) One man mentioned that he and his wife like to see plays about the Midwest. The same man mentioned that he often makes decisions based on what friends recommend on Twitter.

PT:

- Arts & Leisure from the New York Times
- New York Times, other reviews “Reviewers aren’t always right.”
- Positive reviews can sway if on the fence
- Trust in the theater presenting the work
- Playwright, cast, director
- Positive reviews can sway if on the fence
- What’s playing in London and if it’s transferring to America is influential
- Having the free time
- Shows with discounts often get preference- what’s available on TDF
- Inventive new works – interested in technically interesting shows that incorporate new methods, multimedia
- Topical burnout leads to interest in new plays – overproduction of classics leads to looking for something different to see

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- Harvey: Used to try to read the script before I saw it. But now, I sorta like going to it fresh. I like going to something fresh. There's a validity in that. He likes seeing it before it's reviewed.

CB: Our focus group participants expressed a desire for complex work, and some said they were particularly interested in subjects that were more contemporary (rather than classical works). Some expressed an interest in “testimonial” work, or plays based on real people and experiences. The participants also expressed an interest in the work of the particular playwright/director of the evening's performance. They also expressed that if a friend who they often go to the theater with was interested in a piece they would be more likely to attend with that friend.

Participants made their decision to come based on seeing information about the play via a postcard sent to a friend, Facebook, and Cutting Ball's e-newsletter.

3. How did the focus group participants respond to the suggestion that there is a dearth of information about new plays?

PH: It appeared as though the discussants accept that the typically produced information around new plays – i.e. show descriptions, buzz from other productions, video interviews with the playwright – is the only information available and they make the best use of it to inform their decisions. When asked about increasing access to playwrights, all participants felt that more in-person events would be beneficial to their understanding of and connection to new plays.

CTG: What seems to drive them crazy is a paucity of information—about process and context—in our program and other written materials. Some are angry that our written materials exist only for advertising and development purposes.

GT: One participant mentioned that he likes to read plays before he sees them, but seemed to understand that scripts are not always available. Some of them stated that they wished certain information was available (eg, video interviews with artists), **but actually all of that information IS available on our website and other places—so perhaps the question is, have we made it readily accessible?**

PT:

- Participants felt that organizationally, we offered enough information regarding new works through our emails and mail pieces

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- Generally, participants felt that the organization presenting the new work was more important than the work itself
- “I think anything like that [website, postcards, etc.] that invites the possible theatergoer to try and understand what they’re gonna see. Internet is a good forum.”

CB: The participants seemed to think that there was enough information available about this particular play. They were interested in the topic, and were not afraid of Googling or going to the theater’s website to find out more information about the play.

4. How does the level of information that is available influence the discussants’ perception of risk? Is a lack of knowledge associated with risk? Or do the audience members need to know about the potential challenges of a production in order to consider it risky?

PH: Many participants rallied around video as a prime risk mitigator, in that it provides a more tangible glimpse of what the play will be like when they experience it onstage. Interestingly, all participants pointed to the show description – which references that the protagonist is “called to a life of religious service” and that it takes place in a soup kitchen – and described that they took a risk, hoping the play wouldn’t be too preachy or focused on religion. However, all participants in both focus groups do substantial research before purchasing to ensure it’s a production they’ll enjoy. It appears that they do need to know about the potential challenges of a production in order to consider it risky and make a decision to see it or not.

WM: Regarding the choice to attend new plays, many focus group subjects expressed faith in the consistently high quality of Woolly’s productions: “Production quality, especially for new work. Coming to something I don’t know about, I have to trust in where I’m going. I have to know my time will be respected. It’s a contract. I show up and I am ready.” Most subjects cited familiarity with the actors (mostly Woolly Mammoth company members, who appear on our stage regularly). Two subjects named playwrights with whom they were familiar, but most focused on the casts. Several subjects mentioned the subject-matter of the plays as incentives, observing that Woolly plays often have a social or political timeliness: “The thing about new plays is that it puts me in touch with young playwrights and cultural references and new ideas that I may not be familiar with.” Others mentioned customer service and the sophistication of other audience members at Woolly: “The audience here is of a different caliber. It’s hard going to other [theatres]—those other places have tourists and stuff.”

Regarding risk, all focus group subjects said they enjoyed being surprised, “going in fresh” without a preconceived opinion from a review, and experiencing something they’d never

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seen before. Most subjects also attend the Shakespeare Theatre, and this provided a useful foil: many enjoy seeing a new director's variation on a familiar classic, although some said they've seen plays such as *Hamlet* too many times already. "I am pulled to new plays because you can walk out afterwards and there is something to say other than, 'gee, those costumes were so good!' There is a conversation you can have with someone you go with, or just in general. If there's a message and if the writing is good, then it stays with you for days after and it really resonates. **I like to see plays with other people knowing that we can talk about it after: 'what did you think of this? I didn't understand that.'** It will stick."

AS: Almost all of the participants seemed initially unfazed by the idea of seeing a new play being risky. But further discussion led to a few exceptions: one-actor shows ("because if you don't like the performer, you're stuck with them") and shows where the play is directed by the playwright ("If something happens and the play is going in the wrong direction....if there's no one to tell him something's going in the wrong direction, it might not work. You don't want someone to be too zoned in on their work."). One participant prefers a show with clean language, especially if he's attending with his (adult) children.

One couple felt strongly about not seeing shows that are emotionally draining. They cited previous seasons' *The Velocity of Autumn* and *The Quality of Life* which dealt with aging and euthanasia. As older people, they don't want to be reminded of the challenges they are facing in their own lives with their family or friends, or themselves.

When asked if they prefer seeing "classic" plays or new works, all of the older participants (50+) expressed a preference for new plays. Only the young couple (with an STC employee) cited an interest in seeing classic plays. For them, they feel like there are gaps in their theater knowledge and seeing those classic plays helps to catch them up with their peer groups and with society as a whole. The older participants feel like they've seen the classics enough times that they don't need to revisit them, or that those plays spoke more directly to another time and place. For the older participants, new works about today's issues were of the most interest.

CTG: They did not seem to mind attending a "risky" play, but reading between the lines, I gather that doing so would be easier if they had an outlet in which they could discuss the play and any questions they may have had about it. Does this mean that these are people who want to be told what the play is about? Maybe, which could be disappointing. But on the other hand, could it be that they just want to dive deeper and get additional meaning from and about their experience? Probably. And is it wrong to tell people what it's about if they haven't understood the play? The play of course states its own case, but anecdotally, I can say I've witnessed audiences change

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their minds about a play when they've heard someone express what they thought it was about.

They also seemed to see going to the theatre and in particular seeing new plays as a civic responsibility. One said she expects movies to be good; she cuts theater much more slack. However, it's also clear that the price point of a theater ticket can determine how much risk they are willing to take on a new play. If a ticket comes at around \$20-30, then they'll go see pretty much anything, even if, as one participant said, "One is dreadful, one okay, one might be really good." If a ticket is expensive, it damn better be worth it; they want to know it's good.

In short, this group at least is excited to be surprised and to be among the first to see a new piece of theatre, as long as they don't feel they've risked a lot of money on their excursion. Risk or perceived risk doesn't really seem to faze them at all. They do hunger for more engagement around the plays, though, and it seems that access to more stories about the making of the art makes them hungrier for further adventures.

GT: Many people expressed that they didn't feel they were taking much of a risk. A couple people said they trusted the Goodman and its reputation to bring them a good play, and named some other theaters that they trust less. And yet, at the same time, many people in the first focus group (with *Smokefall* ticket-buyers) mentioned being motivated by reviews to see the play, and seemed to indicate that the first thing they do when seeing a play is check the online reviews. One woman said that there is always a risk with new plays, but when ticket prices are reasonable she feels it's not a big risk. (She had tickets to *World*, which is playing in our smaller space with lower ticket prices.) Another woman mentioned that she had heard the play was sad, so she was a little ambivalent about subjecting herself to that. One man said he'd never seen a bad play (implying he wasn't too worried about risk), and a couple people agreed that they hadn't either, and a couple people said that they definitely had seen a bad one. Several people expressed that they felt they often are drawn to newer material (not necessarily world premieres, but contemporary plays as opposed to classics).

PT:

- Really only willing to take risks on new plays at companies they have a good relationship. They are invested in brand loyalty and place trust in institution when choosing new works, production values were listed as a big influence
- Participants felt it is easier to take a risk on a new play Off-Broadway rather than Broadway due to price point
- "I'd look at the first season [of a new theater group]. See how they do. Then sign on if it looked good. But we're full up."

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CB: This was interesting, because none of the participants seemed to expect that the production was going to be particularly risky until I suggested that it might be. When I proposed that the poetic language, or use of Spanish in the production could be a risk they all considered these issues and said that they were interested in seeing how they played out in the production, but were not deterred by these challenges. One participant said “the question mark, the curiosity is growing as we’re talking.” In general the group was actually motivated by these challenges. Regarding the use of poetic language one participant said “As far as poetic language, if the poetry’s good, I’m gonna enjoy it. We’ll just see how it lands.” Regarding the use of Spanish, one native Spanish speaker said, “For me, it’s great, it’s fantastic. It’s welcoming. But I don’t think you’ll have the same experience. At the same time that they’re welcoming that culture, they’re limiting the experience of other cultures. Will they be included in the conversation?”

One participant expressed that work that was about a social issue was risky in a different way because there was the potential for the play to be overly didactic and “Retraumatize ourselves over what is happening.”

5. In what ways do the respondents want to learn about and engage with the performances they see?

PH: Many of the participants referenced some modifications of the post-performance discussions, whether in Q&A, moderated, or free form. A few suggested getting someone unaffiliated with the production and not on the artistic staff – so another playwright, for instance – whose name has cache to come and lead the discussion.

A few also suggested publishing the scripts, which Playwrights Horizons already does for each production. They also got very excited around ideas for digital and online engagement around the play, and not just on traditional social media – they’d love for theaters to host these conversations on their websites or in some other dedicated forum. A couple also mentioned the idea of an algorithm that could predict and recommend future shows based on past attendance. Some were also very intent on seeing more free events – with adult beverages – happen around performances, complete with discussion of the play and interaction with the artists.

WM: This hunger for novelty was balanced by a desire for help interpreting pieces that leave them scratching their heads. None of the subjects worried that a new play might be too esoteric. But they all expressed some interest in hearing insights from the artists that might unlock aspects of a play that they found opaque. Opinions varied about the ideal

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format (live vs. online, immediately following a performance vs. another evening). Most expressed interest in speaking with either the director or playwright over a casual drink after seeing the show: “Sometimes I walk out and I don’t know what the play was about. I think I am a fairly intelligent person, [but] I don’t know where to start interpreting it. I would love to hear the writer and director talking about [their] choices.” (It’s important to note that the dominant regional theatre producing model makes this challenging, since directors and PWs typically leave town for the next gig after opening night.) “I come here to learn something else. I go open. I tell friends to check everything at the door. You might hate it. It may not be your cup of tea. And that is valid. It’s nice afterwards to ask, ‘what did it mean to you?’ I would love a post-show meetup [with the artists] at the bar next door.”

Many subjects were intrigued by an example given by a former New Yorker of an annual event hosted by the Guggenheim Museum in partnership with the Metropolitan Opera. In advance of each opera, subscribers were given access to live discussions at the museum about the productions in development. A few singers would appear in costume and perform excerpts from the music, and the audience had a chance to ask questions about the opera’s history and upcoming production. The focus group subjects agreed that such special access to new plays in development might help strengthen their anticipation and understanding.

AS: A few participants said they like to discuss the show with more than just the people they attended the show with; they want to discuss it with friends who have seen the show as well, or who are going to see the show.

Most people liked the idea of a synopsis that tells them salient things about the plot, the style and the theme of the show. They like accessing these things through the website and having them sent directly to them by email.

CTG: They are also hungry for more opportunities to converse about the play—preferably with one of the generative artists but also with anyone knowledgeable about the play and its creative team. They seemed excited by the idea of having additional materials (a printed informational sheet in the lobby, a postplay email with links to interesting and relevant articles, links to a podcast with someone from the creative team) provided to them after they’d seen the show. ...

They particularly want to hear from the playwright and/or the director. We heard variants of “Why’d she write it and why does she think it’s important?” There was talk of that kind of information being akin to the extras on a DVD. But one also said that the information also doesn’t have to be entirely revelatory; she’d be happy just to read fun and interesting tidbits.

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On the whole, I was surprised at how uninterested they seemed to be in receiving information to help them in making their purchase decision. A gut feeling or just a reaction from a piece of marketing or from an ad seemed enough to get them to purchase a ticket. To be sure, there were some key words in the description (in the case of *Marjorie Prime* at the Taper, the fact that it was futuristic, that the topic of memory and loss of memory was mentioned) which helped them make a decision, but they all seem to long for opportunities to dive more deeply into their experiences once the purchase has been made.

One suggestion they made seems like a no-brainer to me: that instead of placing a marketing graphic into our program advertising the next show in our season, we should insert a short article about the next show (e.g., a short q&a with its playwright or director, a fun fact about the play, etc.). They all agreed that that sort of information would make it likelier they would consider buying a ticket to the subsequent production.

GT: Answers to this question were all over the map. They included: discussions with playwrights, trailer videos and interviews with artists on Facebook, wanting more info about the play to be on the printable tickets. One woman says she always reads OnStage, our magazine for patrons that gives contextual info. Some enjoy post show discussions; others want an experience in which the theater staff/artists are doing all the talking so that they don't have to listen to random audience comments. Several people mentioned that they don't like to know too much before a performance and purposely avoid engagement, but might feel compelled to research it afterwards.

PT:

- Participants were interested in the evolutionary process of a work from workshop to main stage (Public Lab)
- Read synopsis ahead of time, would like more info on the actors prior to the performance.
- "Used to try to read the script before I saw it. But now, I sorta like going to it fresh. I like going to something fresh. There's a validity in that. I like seeing it before it's reviewed."
- Most reflected that they like to take the Playbill home and read afterward.

CB: One of the respondents said that they were interested in going to early stages of the development of a new work if they already knew a playwright's work. If however, they were being introduced to a new playwright they were more inclined to see the work after it had been developed further.

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Cutting Ball sends out a “3 Things to Look for” email the day before a patron sees a performance. This is intended to help the patron prepare for the performance and to encourage them to observe ideas in the performance that operate outside of the narrative. Two of the participants spent their time prior to coming to the focus group reading this email and talking about and observing the neighborhood the theater was in (this was one of the 3 things to look for).

One of the participants expressed that he often preferred to go into a performance knowing nothing. He said, “I really love surprise. I really do. Depending how I feel. If I feel that it’s too complex or something, sometimes I do my homework. But sometimes I throw myself to the ____, and see what happens.”

6. How do the focus group participants envision the playwright’s role within the theatre or within their theatregoing experience? What sort of access do they want to playwrights?

PH: Nearly all participants honed in on wanting to know more about what in the playwright’s life would inspire a given production. They’d be happy to see this done in the manner of a pre-recorded interview or a live discussion around a given set of performances. Many also hoped more access to the playwright would open up the production process and lend more behind-the-scenes insight there, too.

AS: Pretty much everyone agreed that access to the playwright and director was very exciting, either as a pre- or post-show experience. Many cited having attended post-show discussions before. A few seemed unaware that such an opportunity could actually exist. Similarly, people seemed very excited by the idea of getting to see a promotional video letting them know what the show was about or allowing them to see an interview with someone from the creative team. **Most seemed unaware that these types of videos already exist and are available on our website (and are sent to them via email, posted in the lobby and on social media).**

GT: Most said that they would like to interact with playwrights in some way. Several people agreed that it would be thrilling to know that the playwright would be in the theatre on the same night they are. Others said their ideal post show discussion would involve the playwright. Some said they would like to interact more personally with the playwright—“over drinks.” One woman said she’d like a Q and A not just about the play, but about the playwright’s life and choice to become a playwright, since it’s a very different life choice from most people she knows. Another person, who teaches college, said that her students could benefit from meeting playwrights because many of them are interested in the arts

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but have no idea how to carve a life path within the arts, and a playwright could give them insights. One woman brought up the question of how to interact with a playwright if she didn't enjoy the play? She questioned whether it was okay to tell them that, or not.

A woman expressed her hesitation to attend events with the playwright/director (namely, the Goodman's Artist Encounter series) because she would feel like a "groupie." A man said he is hesitant to come to smaller events unless he has a friend to go with him, because it makes him feel anxious. He does not feel nervous attending theatre alone because it is a bigger crowd, so he can just blend in.

PT:

- Participants felt new works benefited from the presence of the playwright in and around the theater – **audience access to this individual could be beneficial in creating a relationship that transcends the singular work**
- Interested in the option of having talk backs with the artists – not as interested in preshow activities
- "Fun but not necessary. Once in a while would want to ask, What were you thinking?"
- "The works speaks or doesn't for itself. It's not part of my experience to engage the playwright."

CB: One participant said, "I love learning about a playwright's process." She also said she wished there were more opportunities to read new plays before seeing them. Several participants said they were interested in what the playwright was trying to accomplish as an artist. They wanted to know what they were trying to do with the work. Another participant said he would value an opportunity to "continue having that conversation about a piece later....You have a chance to really contemplate it, and see how it impacts you. It can be a day later, a week later, a gathering. I think that for me that would be really interesting."

Regarding the benefits of having more interaction with playwrights one participant summarized the thoughts of the group when they suggested, "If I decided I wasn't that impressed with whatever my interaction was with a person, I might not go see their work. But I think mostly I'd be inclined to want to support them and become interested in whatever ideas they were working on. I'd think that is a cool idea and I'd like to see it realized. Making some kind of personal connection draws me in."

7. Have these interviews changed the way you think about your audiences for new plays in any way? How so?

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PH: No...and yes. We've always believed that audiences for new plays are smart, curious, rigorous theatergoers who have varied tastes. They bring their commitment to a new level just by participating in this study. We aren't surprised that they are hungry for engagement. **What does surprise us is that so much of what they desire with regards to engagement – and especially with playwrights – are things we already do. So now we must strive to better trumpet these events and happenings in our marketing.**

AS: Not exclusively in terms of new work, but in general, I have a strong sense that we probably can't show the audience too much. Recently there have been instances at Arena of certain images of specific moments in the show deemed "not to be shared" in advance because we don't want to "spoil" the moment for the audience. I think that mindset may be misguided. I wouldn't give away a plot twist, but showing the audience what they're going to see probably brings in many more people to attend than it scares people off (or "ruins the moment"). **Audiences want to know what they're getting, and the more we can spell that out for them, I think the better.**

I want to add headings to different segments of our marketing materials, be it a postcard or online, that specifically spell out "What it's About" or "Why You Should Go" to help the customers' eyes find the information they most want to see. We probably can't talk down to them too much.

Audiences are hungry for comedy. More than a gripping treatise on some relevant social issue, they want to know they're going to have a good time. If the show is funny, we need to make it absolutely clear that it so.

GT: I was struck by how different their levels of knowledge and experience were, and by how much their tastes differ (ie, loving post show discussions vs hating them). Some people, I think, just buy tickets to "a play" without thinking much about whether it's new or not, because, as one person said, "almost all plays are new to me." So I think whether we are producing a new play or any other play, we have to keep in mind that each audience member has a different relationship and experience level with theatre in general, and make sure we're providing a variety of materials and experiences so that people can pick and choose. While this may have a great deal to do with the two different plays each focus group was seeing (one show was a remount of a critically-lauded production and the other had not yet been reviewed) I was surprised by the extent to which the first group said they relied on reviews to guide their decision-making. And yet I was also surprised to hear how little the second focus group cared about reviews, and was really surprised to see how thoroughly they engaged with the supplemental material Goodman provides around each

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play. The contrast between both groups does speak to just **how diverse Goodman's audience is in terms of how and why they choose to engage with the work on stage.**

PT:

- Interviews gave insight into our audience relationship to our organization and our works
- One of the respondents said, "You forget what you've seen or where you've seen it." I love this response. It's how it should be! That people see so much theater they don't know all they've seen!

CB: One of the things this process made me realize is that our work often attracts a variety of people including those who see a lot of traditional theater, as well as those who are more broadly interested in performance (dance, performance art, multi-media work). Depending on the theatergoer they have different expectations of a performance. I was interested to hear that sometimes the same audience member will choose to do a lot of research on their own about a play, including reading the play itself if available, and then at other times the same person will decide to show up cold to a production. No single play goer wants the same thing all the time.

8. Are there any other significant themes or ideas that emerged over the course of the focus group discussions? Is there anything else you want to share about the experience?

WM: After the formal Q&A discussion, we had a casual conversation with focus group subjects about how they became regular theatergoers. The majority replied that their mothers had taken them to the theatre regularly when they were younger. When asked whether they took their own children to plays, many said that they'd tried. Some said that their young adult sons and daughters were less interested in theatre, or complained that they didn't have the time or money. However, one subject described a theatergoing ritual with her grandchildren in New York: "We see every play, every movie. We eat popcorn for dinner and talk about it all!"

GT: This doesn't have a lot to do with new plays, but I thought it was interesting: one person said that he used to be a subscriber, but he and his wife ended up missing performances and wasting their money. Now, they buy single tickets, which of course cost more per ticket. He was wondering if there could be some kind of reward for single ticket buyers who have bought MANY single tickets. Others nodded their heads in agreement when he mentioned this.

PT:

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- There was an overwhelming theme of the importance of reputation when considering attending new work – reputation of presenter/organization, director, writer, etc.
- Decisions are based on a love of theater in general first, then in order, the theater company, production values, finally, playwright and subject matter
- Negative 1st experiences can prevent repeat visit to a theater company
- Often decisions are made based less on intellectuality and more just what to do on Saturday
- Group members referred to us as the “original downtown theater” but when asked about their theater going habits, they didn’t mention any actual downtown theaters. Most theaters our audiences attend are in midtown or uptown - LCT, Roundabout, Signature, MCC, MTC, Playwrights
- Patrons like the idea of our theater being able to offer stars the chance to do their dream project – as a home to artists, we should do more with stars
- Having a restaurant in the building is convenient
- Pre-show emails are great and reminders
- The smaller focus group was not so interested in talkbacks
- The frequency and method of communication was acceptable.

CB: Although being familiar with the artist’s work seemed to be the most unifying reason for going to a performance, the participants also stressed that being generally interested in the topic of the production was a second but important determining factor, a participant also said that they had been generally impressed by our theater company’s work so the organization’s brand and reputation for quality seemed important. Finally, it was helpful that one participant emphasized “dramaturgical articles pull me in. There are more plays than I can see.” Similarly several participants said that work that contextualizes the piece, or provides visual cues to what the piece is going to be like is helpful to have in the lobby and also on the website.

9. What one or two insights will you take away from these conversations?

PH: Let’s focus on our existing programs and better promoting them to a wider audience before we go about generating completely new ones.

CTG: I myself was surprised by how unfazed they seemed about seeing new plays and how comfortable they were with the possibility that the play might not be for them. Given how small our one focus group was, it’s clear that we can’t call this a representative sample of our single-ticket purchasers at the Taper. Nonetheless, especially when a ticket was affordable, they were game for anything. I was also surprised by how much focus they placed on the program, how they saw that it had primarily become an advertising and fund-

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raising tool, and how they longed to spend time with written information about the play after they'd seen it.

I suspect that this desire to have more information is based not only on wanting to be educated but also on wanting to be in-the-know, to be an expert, to be ahead of other audiences, just as they enjoy being among the first to see the work itself. Even in this group, it was clear that they were enjoying showing off their theatre discernment with one another. **Clearly there are several easy opportunities to create theater ambassadors.**

GT: People want to engage theoretically, but it has to be pretty convenient for them to do so. A lot of the things they mentioned that they would like are things we actually do offer, but sometimes they weren't aware of that. I imagine it's just because people are very busy. So it's our responsibility to a) put great work on our stages, and b) make sure we are making our engagement materials very clearly available. One respondent also talked about how the volume of email he gets from the Goodman, and the "canned language" at the top of many of these emails keeps him from reading further down into the email, in which he might find out about the audience engagement efforts he frequently misses out on. So it seems that it might be that audience members are receiving communications about the engagement materials but that those communications aren't as effective as they could be because of the sheer volume of those communications and/or their tone.

PT:

- Our audience seems to have a predilection towards our new plays but not the new plays of others. They are comfortable taking risks with us because they trust us.
- Shakespeare was a gateway for people to get to our organization
- Audiences want to trust in a company to make artistic decisions for them. Even if those decisions are not always to their liking, production values can compensate for it.
- They seemed conflicted about how much interaction with artists and behind the scenes info they wanted.

CB: There is a lot of value to the dramaturgical information we put up on our website although every playgoer may not choose to read it, the information does seem to be important. I think that providing space for the artists statement of what they are trying to accomplish with their work would be valuable to always have on the website. Providing access to our artists also seems to be a way to create a feeling of connection between prospective audience members and our work as they choose between a myriad of productions.