

## Triple Play: Interview Reports

### Playwrights:

JL: Jacqueline Lawton, Arena Stage

MG: Madeleine George, Playwrights Horizons

MZ: Martín Zimmerman, Goodman Theatre

NS: Nilaja Sun, Woolly Mammoth

NJ: Nicole Jost, Dog & Pony DC

DO: Dan O'Brien, Center Theatre Group

MM: Mona Mansour, Public Theater

AS: Andrew Saito, Cutting Ball

KN: Ken Narasaki, East West Players

**1. Briefly reflect on the process of interviewing audience members. What was your experience? 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?**

JL:

- This was a great experience. Having participated and blogged about the conversation at Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, I hope to be involved in the third round as well.
- I stuck to the questions and didn't depart from the guidelines.

MG: I loved interviewing these audience members. The experience of talking to these single ticket buyers has already had a significant impact on how I conceive of my role as a playwright. I labored not to depart from the research guidelines, though it was super challenging for me not to follow people's leads into wildly off-topic discussions. I also fought back the impulse to kibbitz with these folks about the particular pros and cons of shows we'd both seen. I have to admit that once when Kyle left the room to get something for a minute I indulged my wish to chat with one interviewee about THE BOOK OF MORMON. Sorry!

NS: We received far more survey responses from potential interview subjects than from potential focus group subjects. This was mainly because we were able to draw from our entire pool of single ticket buyers, rather than only the ticket holders for one weekend. As a result, our interview subjects were far more diverse than our focus groups. The interview subjects included two men (one of whom was under 25), an African American woman, and an Asian American woman.

NJ: dog & pony dc is a nontraditional (devising) theater company; it was a given that all of our interviewees were open to new and unique forms of theater. Their attendance at dog &

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pony's most recent production (*Toast*) speaks to a certain appetite for risk. All of the interviewees also mentioned the value of a communal event with audience interaction (during the performance), which is a characteristic of all dog & pony productions. In other words, these were not necessarily typical audience members. They might be considered "ideal" audience members for new works, people who were well informed and willing to take chances. Knowing this made some of their responses all the more fascinating, and sometimes surprising, to us.

DO: Interviewing these theatre-goers was an interesting, pleasant experience. All three—or four, really, as our third respondent surprised us by bringing along his partner—were friendly and happy to be answering these questions.

MM: The patrons that responded to the request for the interview seemed like they attend theater in general less than the focus group members, but overall were much more adventurous and open to attending works they knew little about.

AS: Interviewing audience members was an informative and interesting process. I did not depart from the research guidelines. All of the audience members I interviewed were strikingly intelligent, articulate, and insightful. All of the interviewees were saw a fair amount to a great deal of theater. We met in Cutting Ball's office, where tea and snacks were provided.

KN: The interviews were conducted in one of the dressing rooms at East West Players. With a show up and running, the dressing room definitely had a "lived in" feel that we hoped was conducive to creating a casual atmosphere. We stuck to the questions and tried to stay as close to the research guidelines, but did sometimes ask follow-up questions and sometimes spoke informally about productions that we had seen in common. Because of a lack of response and two last-minute cancellations, we only interviewed two audience members.

### 2. What factors do the respondents consider when deciding what play to see?

JL:

- Diversity of characters.
- Interesting and engaging content/themes.
- High quality productions.
- Affordability and easy access to theatre.

MG: First of all, the people I talked to want to know if the play speaks to them directly-- either because it reflects an element of their own life, has familiar content, or, conversely, offers them an experience of something they've never seen before. (One interviewee said

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she went to see WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF on Broadway because her kid was reading it in school; she also went to see GATZ at the Public in the same season because she wrote her college thesis on Fitzgerald.) Second of all, they want to know if the play is any good. They want to know if it will be worth their time, effort, and money to go see. So reviews, particularly in the Times, play a major role in decision-making for all the ticket buyers I interviewed. One person described her role as the "family theater concierge"--she's in charge of reading every review that comes out in the Times and using them to figure out what her husband and son will like. The people I interviewed also look at online individual Yelp-style reviews. They look at video clips online, feature articles, and ads. Generally they seem not to discern too finely between sponsored content, professional critical content, features in newspapers and magazines, and lay comments--they're interested in anything that will help them decide whether or not they're going to enjoy a play. Awards, raves, and blurbs help them feel secure about investing in tickets. Several people echoed the "I'm an average Joe, if other people like it I probably will too" idea.

In a couple of cases, people knew someone involved in a production ("Sarah Ruhl's kid is in my kid's class"; "I have a friend whose brother-in-law is what's that guy's name, he's won things, Bart Sher. She's in my book group and she gets us tickets"). Other than that, though, they mostly didn't care who the playwright was, other than in the case of big-name playwrights like Shakespeare and August Wilson, whose "brand" they recognize.

People talked about choosing books, movies, dance, and TV in the same train of thought as choosing plays, which seems important to me. Whatever motivated them to take in a particular movie wasn't *that* different from what motivated them to take in a particular play. I sometimes imagine that people use entirely different criteria for picking theater pieces, given the added expense, but that seems only somewhat true, it's mostly not a meaningfully different selection process.

NS: Among the four subjects, sharp gender differences emerged. It was interesting to note that — despite an age difference of over 20 years — both male subjects tended to describe themselves as consumers who read reviews to feel confident they'll be satisfied with their experience of a play. Both female subjects, on the other hand, characterized themselves as supporters of the performing arts who appreciated that this required some comfort with the unknown. Instead of reviews, they valued preview articles or readings of plays in development: "I don't read reviews before I see the play, but I like to afterwards. Maybe as a form of validation! I've attended some things where they read through the play [in development]. So that helps me determine if I want to see the whole thing." "An interview (like NPR) and word of mouth. Interviews are very compelling to me. Having a top actor is attractive but that's not necessarily going to attract me. The [story] has to be compelling."

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DO: All four respondents said they were most attracted to shows that simply “caught their interest.” Sometimes this had to do with subject matter and synopses, other times because the play or musical’s title was a “classic” or simply familiar (and usually a hit elsewhere), or there was a well-known actor in the cast. Our first respondent, Lisa, said she was more apt to see a show with an actor she might know from the community, as her daughter is an aspiring stage actor in Los Angeles. Mailings and emails from theaters seemed to be the main way they learned of upcoming productions, though social media also plays a significant role, they said. Basic information about the show was often enough to help them reach a purchasing decision, but all four respondents said they would sometimes do some more research at a theater’s website, and/or read preview and review articles. Reviews in general were strong factors in their decision-making, and all four respondents named the Los Angeles Times and New York Times as their primary, trusted sources for reviews and features. None of the respondents seemed to factor a production’s director into their decision to see the show or not. Leroy was attracted and loyal to theaters with a “nice ambience,” meaning larger theaters with pleasing architecture, and Lisa noted her appreciation for theaters, such as the Kirk Douglas Theatre, that often presented interactive lobby information.

Lisa said she chooses almost entirely to see “uplifting” theatre she feels will not be “creepy or scary” in terms of sexuality or violence. Leroy said he looks for “substantive” plays about complex themes, and especially plays with complicated character development. It should be noted, however, that Leroy wasn’t interested in the kind of “challenging” play that “tries to do too much” and “doesn’t have a clear point,” hinting at an affinity for didacticism and thematic conclusions he already agrees with. Plays by and about people of color were almost always of interest to Leroy, especially as he often brings his son with him and wants him to view theatre as a vital forum for the exploration of social issues. Leroy firmly believes that there aren’t enough stories about people of color being produced at local theatres, and he hopes that by attending these plays he can help influence what gets programmed in the future. Leroy’s wife, on the other hand, prefers less complicated plays—often musicals—so Leroy admitted that it’s always a balancing act to find work that the entire family can enjoy. Matt and Ted, our third and fourth respondents, resisted generalizing about what kind of theatre tends to attract their attention, but they had clear and often passionate opinions about what they did and did not want to see in the particular.

MM:

- Has to be unique and weird. Something off-center. Challenging. Unexpected.
- An experience you cannot get in other parts of the country.
- Relationship of work to source material. Level of translation to the stage. Universal feeling of a work. Relatability.

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AS: One interviewee waits to read reviews before seeing a play. Reviews play a significant role in his choices.

Location was a factor for one interviewee. As he doesn't own a car, accessibility via public transportation is important.

Several of the interviewees referred to being familiar with a cast member or somebody else involved in the production as being a significant draw. These could be either theater artists whose work they had seen before, or somebody they knew personally.

One interviewee reads synopses of plays to help decide what to see.

The visual execution of a play was important to one interviewee. He wanted to see a video clip (for example) that would give him a greater sense of the visual experience of seeing the play. Still photos are not enough.

One respondent said that there is one director whose work he will never see.

KN: One subject has lived in several major cities over the past ten years and has lived in Los Angeles for just over a year. He always actively sought out theatre in whatever city he lived in, usually relying on newspaper reviews while trying to see what was playing, then sometimes going to the theatre websites to get a sense of the venue he was going to. Another subject sought out specific types of shows and actively sought them out, also beginning with newspaper reviews and/or articles and interviews. Both subjects mentioned that they were especially interested in shows featuring characters like themselves (i.e. South Asian plays or plays about women of color). Both subjects said social media sometimes came into play, especially if friends of theirs said positive things about a play they'd seen; one subject said sometimes friends would arrange for a show, sometimes he would be the one to do the research and say something like, "This looks good, do you guys want to go on Friday?" Word of mouth was still important to both subjects. Both received email announcements from East West Players but admitted that they rarely looked at them. When asked if they thought they received too much email from EWP; if fewer emails would make them more likely to open and read them, both equivocated, unsure if that mattered. One subject said he was mostly interested in the premise, setting, and characters in looking for plays to watch; he intentionally avoided any kind of synopsis on theatre websites or in reviews – he just wanted to know enough to decide whether or not it might appeal to him, but would only do follow-up reading after he'd seen a show. The other subject said that if the play was written by or was about women of color, or was

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about Japanese American subjects, that's all she needed to know to go out to see and support such shows.

### 3. If a play is new and/or unfamiliar, what pieces of information do they need in order to make a decision?

JL:

- Emails, flyers/post cards, ads, and blurbs
- Enjoyed reading artist interviews and watching videos
- Word of mouth, recommendations from friends.
- Some read reviews, but said that they aren't the determining factors.
- Others try to avoid reading reviews and don't like to know too much.
- If there's an actor they know, they would be interested in seeing the play.

MZ: Though there were a range of responses in terms of how much information each respondent needed before seeing a new play, there was a consistent hesitation about seeing a world premiere. Only one respondent indicated preference for seeing a world premiere, and even she admitted she would be hesitant to do so if she didn't know the playwright's work. Some respondents wanted to be able to read reviews and know that a play had been well-received elsewhere, whereas others just wanted to know it had been previously produced and to have a synopsis that would convince them the subject matter might interest them. That said, despite the range of these responses, everyone seemed to want some information that would diminish the risk of seeing a new play. So, even though each respondent said that they preferred work that was challenging (and some indicated that they didn't think a work could be too challenging), no one wanted to take the complete risk of seeing a new play by a playwright they didn't know. In fact, most voiced some hesitation about seeing a world premiere (unless it had first received positive reviews).

NS: As far as the decision to attend a new play, both male subjects repeatedly referred to reviews. They also placed importance on their perception of the quality of the producing theatre and monetary value: "I know I'm going to a professional theatre and paying a good price for that, so I want to make sure that's reflected in that [play]. I know Woolly Mammoth and Shakespeare [Theatre] are good." The female subjects felt that positive prior experience the producing theatre helped strengthen their faith in an unfamiliar play: "If I've had a positive experience — from staff, to the space, to the performance — I'm more likely to sign up to see more of what they're producing."

NJ: Most of the interviewees reported that they prefer not to know too much about a play before they see it. They brought up the idea that reviews/marketing/etc. could "give away" key information or "spoil" the surprise. One interviewee takes great pride in being well

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informed as to what theaters are presenting and being the tastemaker of his friend group – he frequently purchases tickets for friends or organizes group outings. It was clear that the social aspect of attending theater is important to him. Another interviewee bases her decisions on the opinions of trusted friends or word of mouth. She knows the work of several local theater companies and mentioned that she would be more likely to trust that a play would be good if she already knew and liked the work of the company presenting it. By contrast, one interviewee prefers to know more about a play – he reads reviews, and likes to know about a play's development. He also mentioned word of mouth and the opinions of friends as a deciding factor.

#### **4. To what extent did the respondents distinguish between different types of theatre in their comments? In addressing your questions did they distinguish between new works and works that are not new, but unfamiliar? Did they distinguish between dramas and comedies? Or between the work of particular theatre companies or playwrights?**

JL:

- One responded that she likes theatre that depicts life as she sees it, and a cast that reflects the world as she knows it. That is, she wants diversity on stage, and appreciates diversity in programming.
- "When I go to see a play, I want to hear a story I haven't heard."
- "If it's just a play about another dysfunctional family...I could just go talk to my friends."
- Folks enjoy comedies a lot, but also appreciate drama if it reflects real life in a diverse and engaging way. But what matters is the story, characters, and quality of production.

MG: The distinctions that matter so much to us, like which theater is doing the play, were much less important to this group of interviewees. They all talked about musicals vs. plays, comedies vs. dramas, but most of them expressed catholic taste in terms of genre--overall they cared more about whether they believed they were going to like the play (was it relevant to them, did it seem like it was going to be good) than who was doing it where. Several of them explicitly rejected the idea that they would be "loyal" to a particular theater company.

MM: The group of interviewees were willing to go into a production blind, regardless of if the play was new or new to them, so long as it had either good recommendations from friends, a buzz in the media, or was a unique thing to do that they could tell others about. They did not distinguish between comedy, drama, or musical, it was more about experience for them and connecting with friends.

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AS: All of the respondents had particular theater companies that they favored. However, all were open to seeing plays at all theaters.

Nobody expressed a preference for a particular genre of theater (i.e. dramas or comedies, musicals or straight plays).

While there was a certain level of excitement for new plays, the fact that a play is new did not seem like a significant factor for most respondents. They were open to seeing new plays, but sometimes had to be convinced a bit more to see a new play.

On the other hand, one respondent said he also had to be convinced to see a play he already saw, even if the production is entirely different.

Also, a production's status as a 'world premiere' in general was of little or no import to most of the respondents. One respondent did find world premieres enticing, but not regional premieres.

KN: Both subjects were aware that plays would often tout whether or not they were world, regional, or LA premieres, both said pretty emphatically that that did not matter to them. One respondent said that all that mattered was whether or not the play was new to him; the other respondent felt that if a play had already had another run or runs elsewhere, that was evidence that the play had been "vetted" by other audiences and was therefore more likely to be entertaining. They both said that they were equally likely to attend dramas or comedies, though one said that she mostly wished to be "uplifted" when she went to see a show, especially if the tickets were expensive, saying she didn't want to pay to be depressed.

### 5. How did the interviewees feel about theatre that is challenging? How does "challenge" relate to "risk"?

JL:

- Some folks like to be challenged, while others like to be entertained.
- One did not like Shakespeare at all (language). They like being able to understand plot.
- One mentioned not enjoying theatre in the round because it's distracting. However, if the play is one that she wants to see, then she'll go.
- Money and location were also mentioned as challenges.

MG: Not surprisingly, no one I interviewed was willing to say that they didn't want to be challenged, and I think people genuinely do want to be challenged, in the sense that they



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want to be delighted, engaged, and made to think in ways they can't anticipate. They don't mind being disturbed on legit grounds, or being asked to consider their lives critically. Most of all it seems like they don't want to be bored or to be made to feel stupid--and why would they? One interviewee talked repeatedly about "adventure," offering that word in place of the word "challenge," which I thought was interesting. **What might the profit be in theaters conceiving work as "adventurous" rather than "risky"?**

NS: Both male subjects responded with caution to the notion of risk and challenge. They expressed strong opinions about what they would not like, such as intimate experiences with material that might challenge their worldview: "I would rather not be challenged. [I want to] sit back and enjoy... I would rather not see something that challenges my beliefs and comfort zone. Interaction [with the actors] or moving out of my seat would be challenging to me, and not for me... Wasting money [is a risk]. And it would reflect poorly on the theatre." Both male subjects brought up quality and monetary value in relation to plays that might be too uncomfortable to them: "There are some things that are gratuitous, done to make an edgy or political point which is decoupled from empathy for the character, or telling the story... I've seen people walk out of theatres before. But those repugnant pieces would not be done at the highest caliber, quality theatres."

On the other hand, both male subjects cited positive experiences with plays that introduced them to new ways of thinking about historical and cultural topics they thought they knew (for example, Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation...*). The female subjects both spoke of challenge in positive terms; in fact, they demanded it from a new play: "My expectation is that it's not going to be traditional and that it will be out of the box and have more creativity and more challenging subject matter. It draws me if they are willing to tackle imperfect social issues. Bring a new perspective to those things we are already familiar with. Show me something new. Try to change my mind." Regarding the inherent "risk" of a new play: "I have not experienced anything [challenging] to the point where I am put off. I think this question is assuming that this is a risk... For some people it is. I love Pay-What-You-Can nights that bring people to the art. It's something people need, but might not know they need it."

NJ: Two of the interviewees reported interesting experiences with productions that they disliked but still considered to be rewarding – one production was set in a submarine, so even though the interviewee disliked the script, he was fascinated by the design and glad that he had experienced it. The other production was a student performance at a university. The interviewee appreciated the chance to see the student performers (non-theater majors) "blossom." Although she said she wouldn't see it again, she found value in that.

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DO: As for what constitutes challenging work, Lisa said she avoids stories she suspects will be “heavy,” referring again to depictions of sexuality and/or violence, but also to subject matter in general. Leroy, on the other hand, while preferring work he finds challenging in regard to social issues, doesn’t have much interest in—or experience with, apparently—theatre that might be considered challenging in form rather than just content. Matt and Ted said they were fine with challenging work, even drawn to it, but their concept of “challenging” seemed fairly tame to me. For example they said they find Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* “too intellectual.”

MM: Half of the interviewees expressed increased interest if something was more challenging (in a strange space, interactive, etc.), and specifically named that as a reason to go separate from content, playwright, theater, etc. The others were not driven by that, but also did not mind it if the play still allowed them to have a shared experience with friends.

AS: One respondent said that he really likes challenging theater. He doesn’t like theater that is too easy or spoonfed. He has no interest in “Hollywood” on stage.

No respondent voiced an aversion to challenging theater.

KN: Both subjects said that they welcomed theatre that challenged them. One respondent talked about a play done without dialogue which he said really stuck with him because he had to work so hard to understand what was happening and it was so different than anything else he had ever seen. He also mentioned *Black Ryder* as a play that really stuck with him. The other respondent interpreted “challenging” as plays which might be offensive in content; she said that did not bother her and she couldn’t think of a play that was artistically challenging to her.

### 6. What are the perceived risks and rewards of attending new plays? What value (positive or negative) is associated with premieres of new works?

JL:

- One said that they would be more interested in seeing edgier work.
- One said that they like new plays because they engage audiences in a more tangible way than plays in the cannon do.

**MG: Almost universally the category of “new play” held little meaning for these interviewees. Again, they were much more concerned with whether or not they expected to enjoy the play (relevance, quality) than with its development history.**

NS: All of the subjects perceived world premieres and regional premieres as essentially the same (“If it’s new to me, it’s a new play”). However, **the female subjects were more**

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**inclined to value their role as champions of new work and emerging artists:** “I like to support and patronize new talent. I like having something brought to life that can be discussed with other folks. Intellectual stimulation. New work is refreshing. There is a sense of ownership: you saw it first. The idea of supporting a piece of art that may not have otherwise been supported.”

Neither male subject found the ‘world premiere’ distinction particularly meaningful. On the contrary, both seemed to value the staying-power of previously successful plays. The younger male subject often mentioned that his entry-point to theatre was touring productions of Broadway musicals such as *Les Miserables*, which he found so enjoyable he’d see it again. He believed the commercial viability of touring shows was proof of their quality: **“I like to see things that are traveling and well-known. To me, that seems like it must be well-done.”** The older male subject frequently referred to Shakespeare as a “touchstone” for theatrical achievement, and praised Shakespearean productions that had transported him out of contemporary surroundings.

**NJ: All of the interviewees generally had positive associations with new plays, and reported that the distinction between new plays and more established plays was meaningful to them.** They all mentioned the value of seeing something unexpected, of being surprised. However, when probed, two of the interviewees also revealed some trepidation about new works. Both reported that they would rather see a local or regional premiere that had done well in another city, rather than a world premiere, and both were excited about seeing an established play that they hadn’t seen before. One interviewee said she “will not shell out big bucks for a new play unless someone awesome is in it.” (The same interviewee said she was “more forgiving” of new plays, although this seemed to contradict her theater-going preferences and earlier statements.) Another interviewee, when asking about theater that is challenging, said he loves it but “it can go so wrong.” By contrast, one interviewee said, “I’m very willing for an experience to be a dud,” and favored world premieres. His least favorite type of play would be one he has already seen, while another interviewee reported that there are some plays that she will always go see (because she loves them). All of the interviewees said that they appreciate theater that is challenging.

One interviewee said of new plays, “It’s part of the fun. Sometimes they are terrible, sometimes great.” One interviewee brought up the social rewards of supporting local artists and the artistic community as part of the value of attending new plays. One interviewee had a very interesting take on the connection between new plays and risk – his view is that, since no one else has seen the play, there are no expectations (or fewer expectations). In that sense, he said, “It’s almost less of a gamble seeing a new play,” than an established play (that could fall short compared to what you expected). ...

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Another interesting observation from one interviewee was that she feels that the audience experience at a new play is fundamentally different, that it's a more communal experience than attending an established play.

DO: All respondents agreed that new work is a riskier purchase but that the thrill of discovery was often worth the risk. New work is considered less risky if the ticket price is lower, of course. **Everyone seemed to feel that great reviews and known artists are still not often enough to mitigate the financial risk of attending new work, but more in-depth information about the production would make them feel more confident.** For example, both Lisa and Leroy wanted to know specifics of the plot—they weren't worried about spoilers, etc. ...

As for what draws them to new work currently: Lisa likes supporting young talent like her daughter. Matt and Ted enjoy very much the idea that they might see the first incarnation of a play or musical that might go on to broader success. All four respondents were just as happy to see work that was new to Los Angeles and received well elsewhere—or to see a production of a “classic” they'd never seen before—as to see a world premiere. Matt and Ted either loved or hated new work, and I'm sure their sense of risk contributes to the passion of their verdicts. (Interestingly they used the phrase “to sit through” for all kinds of new theatre experiences, positive and negative.)

MM: One respondent said that she relished being one of the first to experience something and felt little risk. Another described the balance of waiting to see if something was amazing or awful, knowing that the experience was one-of-a-kind and would never happen again. Less risk with downtown theater as it is cheaper, but no interest in seeing “safe” Broadway shows.

AS: One respondent said the following, which is worth quoting in its entirety: “I don't consider theater risky...my body is not in danger... my mind is not in danger...I might waste a little bit of time and money. I think it's courageous to keep this ancient art alive. I don't think it's a risk for me personally.”

Reward: Seeing contemporary reality on stage.

Reward: Seeing a living playwright's work and voice develop over multiple plays.

Reward: seeing new developments in theatrical staging technology.

Risk: being bored by a play.

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KN: Both subjects sought out plays that were new to them and both seemed to feel that that was the “norm” in their theatrical experience: Most plays they saw were new to them. If they went to see a Shakespearean play or a classic that they might have seen when they were younger, it was usually because they remembered liking it and were interested to see how a different production might play, but in general, new plays were the norm for them. As far as risks and rewards go, neither expressed much interest in seeing a premiere for the sake of being among the first to see something, and neither really felt like participants in the development of new work – that is, as early audiences shaping something that was still forming. They didn’t consider themselves as being participants as audiences for a new play. One subject did feel there was a downside to seeing new plays in that there was a greater chance that it would not be as good as something that had been around for a while.

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

JL:

- Several wanted to hear from a playwright about what inspired them to write it.
- They enjoy discussing the play with friends or on social media afterward.

MG: **Several of the people I interviewed talked about wishing they had access to things they already could have access to, like watching videos of the playwright on the Playwrights Horizons website or attending a post-show Q&A with the playwright, director, and artistic director. It occurred to me that these people, whose questions about a play of mine I would have loved to entertain, are the very people--curious, adventurous, not jaded, selective about what plays they see--who don't seem to know what's available to them at the theater where my play was done. How can theaters make sure these non-subscriber types are clued in about engagement resources that already exist?**

**One interviewee talked about reading many different reviews of a single book after he couldn't make it all the way through the book, to try to figure out what was holding him back from understanding it, what he might be missing. He said he might do the same thing with a play he sat through but didn't like. This level of curiosity and commitment, even to a work this guy didn't like, struck me as amazing and wonderful.**

NJ: As far as audience engagement, the interviewees did not bring up particularly innovative strategies or things they would like to see. All the interviewees mentioned talkbacks, and some brought up YouTube promos, lectures, interviews, lobby displays, etc. Two interviewees did mention the idea of street theater, something like staging a

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promotional excerpt from a play at a farmer's market or other public venue. There were a couple mentions of dog & pony's engagement strategies (i.e. their production *Beertown* that begins with a potluck, *Toast* which begins with a science fair-type exhibition). ...

Another interviewee likened engagement before/after a play to DVD commentary – a window into the artistic process that he appreciates even if he doesn't necessarily have a question to ask (as in a classic talkback).

DO: Everyone was interested in the intent of the artist and for this reason welcomed the inclusion of more in-depth articles and interviews in the playbill, in emails from the theatre, and on the theatre website. **The playbill as a resource to take with them after the show was a common suggestion, for their own perusal but also to spark and sustain discussion with friends and family. In general they felt that playbills could provide more than they do. Everyone welcomed the idea of more information becoming available via social media and apps for their devices.**

Audience talk-backs with playwrights sounded mildly interesting to them, not so much in terms of helping develop the work, but as a way of gaining **further insight into the inspirations and processes of the artists involved**. They were interested in discussions or lectures that would function like artist commentary "extras" on film or TV DVDs. A few agreed they might be interested in a pre-show event involving the playwright, depending on the play or musical or playwright. Interestingly, there was very little interest in engaging with the actors before or after the show, or most other theatre artists for that matter. Lisa suggested that a talk-back or similar event with the artistic director might be interesting to her; she'd like to learn more about the decision to produce one play instead of another, and the logic behind season planning in general.

MM: Half of the group is interested in all aspects, actors, writers, artists. Half indicated that they did not want to know anything in advance but were more interested in the playwrights voice than actors or the theater producing the work.

AS: One respondent wanted context not just about the content of the play, but the process by which it was made by the collaborative team.

One respondent wanted more information about the historical and artistic contexts of plays, to prepare before attending.

One respondent absolutely did not want to read a play before seeing it, even if it's a classic.

Another respondent likes reading plays before seeing them.

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KN: One respondent was interested in engaging after the fact, saying he would be more inclined to attend a post-show discussion than a pre-show one. If he was interested enough in a show, he might want to find out basic questions, like what made a playwright decide to write this particular story, or how did the director achieve a particular effect, or even how a set was designed (he was a furniture builder/designer). Both said they'd be interested in seeing videos or interviews on the theater website or sent to them via email (though both were unaware that EWP was already doing that)

### **8. How do the respondents think about the process of new play development? Do they see themselves as playing a role in the process that brings new work to the stage?**

JL:

- Some felt they were an important part of the new play development process, but didn't always know about the opportunities to attend readings or open rehearsals.
- They understand that artists use development period to learn more about the play or production.

MG: For the most part, the people I interviewed didn't make a meaningful distinction between new plays and other plays. They were much, much more concerned with what the experience of going out to the theater was going to be like for them and their family/coworkers/friends than with what had gone into making the play they saw. Again, this strikes me as totally sensible. One guy said this great thing about participating in new play development: "If there's a role for the audience, it's something psychic." He described his moment-by-moment emotional responses to a work as the contribution to the play's realization. Lovely.

NJ: When it came to an audience's role in the development of new plays, again the responses were quite traditional. The interviewees all agreed that the audience has a role in the development of new plays, but what they mentioned were only previews and workshops – that the audience's reaction to a complete draft of a play can and should shape subsequent drafts. They didn't seem to have a concept for other forms of interaction between playwrights and audiences that could directly contribute to the development of the play (again, outside of dog & pony's work).

DO: **None of our respondents seemed to think of themselves as participants in the process of new play development. This question stumped them, actually. After a moment all agreed that their presence in the audience, and their engagement (or not) with the performance, should go a long way in helping theatre-makers develop scripts and productions moving forward. But when asked if they'd like to come to**

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**new play readings and workshops if they knew of them in advance, nobody seemed terribly excited. Ted and Matt were definitely not interested in readings: “I go to theater expecting the polished performance. I don’t want to do the work,” said Ted.**

MM: One interviewee said yes, and indicated that this most often happens in the development of comedies. Another agreed but indicated that it depends on who is in the room with them. Tension in the audience. Do they get it or not? Another indicated that too much audience influence can lead to creation by committee and indicated that that was not a good thing.

AS: One respondent said certain plays might be better received in certain geographic areas; content will resonate differently in different places.

One respondent likes attending staged readings and participating afterwards in talkbacks with the playwright.

One respondent enjoys attending workshops and readings, but said that theater audiences shouldn’t ‘test run’ plays too much. This respondent was far more interested in a theater artist manifesting her or his vision than satisfying the desires or expectations of audiences.

KN: Both respondents simply did not see themselves as playing a role in the new play development process and while one might attend a play reading, for instance, both felt that they were mostly interested in the “finished product”.

### **9. How did the interviewees respond to questions that specifically asked them about playwrights? How do they envision the playwright’s role within the theatre or within their theatregoing experience?**

JL:

- Some follow playwrights, if they read their work in school or saw multiples plays.
- Others wouldn’t know who the playwright was.
- Some thought it might be nice to have a conversation with the playwright after the performance either formally or informally.

MZ: Something else that struck me as interesting when discussing new plays they'd attended, is that most of the respondents seemed very unaware of who the playwright was. Only two mentioned any playwrights by name. And only one seemed aware who the playwrights of the new plays she saw were. In fact, this was the only respondent who listed the playwright anywhere in the criteria she used when deciding whether to see a new play. One respondent didn't seem aware of who the playwright was even when she was



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discussing work by a canonical 20th-century playwright, in spite of the fact that this respondent is an avid theatergoer. In fact, when asked which collaborators on a new play this respondent might want to speak with, she mentioned the playwright last behind the actors and director. The second respondent who actually mentioned playwrights by name only mentioned canonical playwrights whom she had studied in an academic environment. Though this particular respondent had attended quite a few new plays (and even some world premieres) she did not express any awareness of who specifically had written those new plays.

That said, most respondents said they would be happy to speak to the playwright live both before and after seeing her or his work, though they didn't agree on whether they thought the playwright would actually want to engage with them. In fact, the amount of nervousness respondents reported about the possibility of asking a playwright questions strongly correlated with how enthusiastic they thought the playwright might feel about answering such questions. **Those who felt the playwright wouldn't want to talk to them or that the playwright "had better things to do" reported more nervousness and less enthusiasm about directly engaging with the playwright.**

NS: All the subjects expressed some interest in hearing "insider" information from the director or the actors: "I would much rather have a beer and talk about random stuff, like how they became lead actors." Both male subjects seemed more interested in viewing a video interview with the playwright rather than one-on-one interaction. In fact, one male subject seemed to have some anxiety around discussing potentially sensitive material with a playwright: "[Playwrights] have a tremendous amount invested in [the play]. By the same token, you are invested as well... I would be a little bit reserved, the more culturally removed they are. If there was an African American woman playwright presenting in DC, there are a lot of things about her life that I wouldn't presume to understand. I might be more interested in a small group discussion. If the play material was not about suffering and beating... If it was lighter and more upbeat, then I would feel more comfortable." (It's perhaps interesting to note that both the interviewer and note-taker were African American women.) On the other hand, one of the female subjects could readily relate to a playwright's experience in a post-show discussion: "[If I were] a playwright I would probably hate it. I would not be sure if this was an honest opinion. But then I would want to know what people thought! It's a balance. We grow as people and artists through useful criticism. Art is hard because art is subjective. Don't put too much credence in other people's thoughts."

NJ: One of the best moments in any of the interviews was in response to attitudes towards playwrights. **The interviewee said his image of a playwright is "stodgy and inaccessible,"** and that he thinks of playwrights as old, white men. This was of course

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pretty funny since he was talking to me (I didn't reveal that I was a playwright), and was also revealing in that many of the theaters he said he feels loyal to frequently present work by playwrights of color and women (and younger playwrights). He feels that he is very well informed about the theater community, so it was surprising that his experiences had not complicated that basic image of a playwright. I asked him how he would feel about engaging with a younger playwright, a writer of color/woman/queer writer, and he said he felt very differently about that and would be more interested in talking to such a person. He also revealed that he finds playwrights intimidating – he said he would “like to be the type of person who could go up to them.” The other interviewees again mentioned talkbacks, and reported that they enjoy hearing about a playwright's process and what inspired him/her. Those interviewees also mentioned that they favored intimate interactions with playwrights, rather than large-scale or lecture-style events (though one said she knew that could be cost-prohibitive).

DO: Everyone seemed generally indifferent to living playwrights, unless their work had been rated a success in New York City by the New York Times. Leroy stated clearly that he doesn't care much about the playwright—“It's all about the story,” he said. Even Matt and Ted, the most experienced and “sophisticated” of the bunch, didn't seem very familiar with living playwrights, aside from some of the biggest “names” of the last few decades.

MM: Two of the interviewees were not fans or followers of the works of any particular playwright. Their attendance was more driven by being social, an evening out with friends. They indicated that attending a new play allowed them to have more interesting conversations afterward.

Others were very aware of specific playwrights and indicated that they were fans of their work sometimes before ever seeing it on the stage. One indicated great interest in having a more private discussion with the playwrights about their work and the thought process behind it. Another intentionally did not attend talkbacks so as not to color the experience, saying talkbacks are not productive nor interesting.

AS: One respondent said he suspects playwrights are inundated with feedback from directors and dramaturges, and don't need any more from the audience.

Playwrights seemed mysterious to one respondent.

All respondents expressed interest in interacting more with playwrights.

KN: Both respondents were not interested in the playwright unless they had a specific question about a particular production – in both cases, they said that they were generally

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not aware of who the playwright was and found the playwright generally irrelevant to their theatre choices, unless it was Shakespeare or Chekhov.

### 10. Are there any other significant themes or ideas that emerged over the course of the interviews? Is there anything else you want to share about the experience?

JL:

- One wondered whether there might be a way to push the theater from the space itself, and create an experience that exists outside the theater (before/after production).
- One also voiced issues of access, specifically for young people and minorities. He suggested that Arena get into schools, and bring students of drama into rehearsals.

NJ: Multiple interviewees mentioned ticket pricing as a deciding factor in their attendance at plays, and one interviewee in particular was very adamant that high ticket prices prevent those in his peer group from attending theater (he said he is often the only young person at a production).

MM: Overall, interviewees indicated that the ways in which we are communicating as theaters are acceptable (web, mail, social media). Some indicated that they were not interested in an overwhelming amount of information prior to the performance, but wanted to do more research after seeing a new play.

KN: The thing that stood out to us was how much theatre going was based on each individual show – what it was about, who it was about, and whether or not the respondents had time to see a show in that particular month. Both, for instance, shied away from the idea of subscriptions because their own schedules were too unpredictable and they just wanted to see what they knew they wanted to see. I have to admit, a lot of their answers were contrary to what I might have wished them to be, and the strength with which both respondents resisted the idea that a premiere of any kind made a play more appealing was a surprise to both of us. These were two intelligent, avid theatre-goers and many of their answers made us realize how insular the theatre world is and how different our audiences' desires and expectations might be from our own. On the other hand, the fact that neither felt that "challenge" in theatre was in any way a "bad" thing, was heartening.

### 11. What one or two insights will you take away from these interviews?

JL:

- **Audiences aren't viewing "risk" in the same way that theatres are. It's an equal risk of time and money to see a new play as it is to see a classic. They just want the play to be interesting, engaging, and high quality productions.**

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- While the idea of a new play or a new to them play was exciting, the world or area premiere didn't get them more excited about a play. It's nice if there is buzz around a show that's coming in from somewhere else or going to Broadway, but they were more interested in content or the experience they would have at the theatre. They are less likely to see a show that they've seen before.

MG: I was extremely moved by the primary motivation these audience members offered for going to the theater: to connect with the people they go to the theater with. Some people went with their students; some went with their children, parents, spouse or other family members; one person went with a group of coworkers on a regular basis. **But all of them said in one way or another that what they want more than anything when they go to plays is to connect with people they love. They want to have something to talk about.**

I have dreaded talkbacks, have felt alternately exposed, criticized, and bored during them, and even at Playwrights where they're so well handled (it's the rare Playwrights Horizons Q&A that devolves into harangues or long, rambling comment exchanges among audience members), I have thought to myself, "Who is this really helping? Who really cares about this empty exercise in 'engagement'?" But partly I think that's because talkbacks are not really a conversation (or I haven't seen them as one?). I was so interested in what these single ticket buyers thought about the plays they'd seen, and how their relationships had been affected by them; if I could have talked to them, or people like them, in a one-on-one setting about my play, I think I would have been thrilled. It made the wheels of my mind start turning--how can I participate in more conversational conversations with audience members about my work? How can we get away from the traditional get-up-in-front-of-the-firing-squad-made-of-people-irritated-enough-to-stay-after-the-show-and-take-their-critique-like-a-man talkback setup? It seems like it's not much fun, and not so illuminating, for anyone involved. I'm working on a commission for a smallish theater in suburban New Jersey right now, and **after participating in Triple Play I've asked the theater to help me set up a series of conversations with groups of audience members in an informal setting, during the writing process, during the rehearsal process, and again during the run of the show. I don't know yet how those audience members might ultimately participate in the play's shaping, but it feels right to include them early and consistently; I'm interested in how they might become a special constituency of the play. After this experience of interviewing audience members, I'm eager to reflect on how I can offer my plays as opening salvos in a conversation, and embroider them with smaller-scale conversations on all sides as they develop.**

MZ: There are several key takeaways for me after this series of interviews. **The first is that a lot of the audience engagement efforts I might have previously disregarded as frivolous now seem much more important to me.** We are asking patrons to spend a fair

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amount of money on a product about which they have limited information. So patrons seem hungry for whatever information they can find before they make the "investment" of purchasing a ticket. At the same time, those patrons have very full lives, and limited time with which to search for that information and make decisions about what to see. Therefore, they tend to gravitate towards the first information they find (an online review) or sources they tend to trust (going to the same theater time and again). Occasionally, they hedge this risk by gravitating towards venues where tickets are consistently affordable. **Therefore, it seems important to take proactive steps to provide extra information for those who seek it out in order to minimize the risk of seeing a new play. Also, the more information the playwright or theater is able to make public, the more likely it is that this information will be what a potential audience member encounters first when they are trying to decide whether to see the play, allowing the playwright and/or theater to have greater influence over the audience member's ultimate decision.**

My other major takeaway from these interviews is how little audience members are thinking about the playwright of a new work, even when that playwright is quite famous within the U.S. theater community. I'm not exactly sure how this realization will affect how I engage with audiences in the future. Does it mean that I, as a playwright, should proactively try to form a relationship with audience members so that they will feel a greater sense of loyalty to my work in the future? **Or does it mean that trying to form such a relationship is ultimately fruitless because who the playwright is doesn't seem to matter so much to new play audiences? Nonetheless the difference between how much theater-makers themselves and the respondents we spoke with think about the playwright is quite striking. It's a difference both theaters and artists must keep in mind when trying to engage with audiences about new plays.**

NJ: My experience conducting these interviews raised the following questions:

1. Would audiences be more likely to attend new plays if the presenting theaters "humanized" their playwrights? Is there something to be gained from that more intimate connection between artist and audience, whether that's in the form of a YouTube interview or an in-person chat?
2. **How can we encourage young people in particular to be those "tastemakers"? What can theaters do to support the social aspect of attending a new play?**
3. **How can theaters communicate the communal nature of attending a new play? How can theaters build community among new play audiences?**

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4. How can theaters balance the risk of attending a new play with ticket prices? How do we ensure that artists are paid while also acknowledging that not all audience members consider seeing a play that's still in development to be a valuable experience?

5. How can theaters communicate the value of risk? How can we encourage audiences to take chances (again, balanced with the question of ticket price)?

DO: To sum up my experience interviewing these four theatre-goers: I enjoyed it on a personal level, and I appreciated their enthusiasm as well as their honesty. I was somewhat disappointed, however, in how conservative they seemed, though Leroy at least is looking for non-mainstream voices and plays of challenging substance. Matt and Ted seemed like every living playwright's worst nightmare: snooty and elitist with some pretty tame if not lame taste. Lisa's exclusive interest in "uplifting entertainment" was likewise dispiriting to me. I think art should be challenging because life is challenging, and that escapist theatre is junk food, at best, and at worst a lie. I suppose I was reminded that we simply like what we like, and that art will always have a hard time finding wide appeal. It was ever thus. Of course, this a sampling of four, and therefore shouldn't necessarily mean too much.

MM: There seemed to be two recurring reasons people attend new plays:

1. As a social activity with friends. More engaging than going to a movie, not as big of a commitment as going to a Broadway show, more casual. Innovative and different which leads to more interesting conversation over the course of an evening, and with a lower cost risk. Also, the "we saw it first" idea. This group sees it as an entire evening, dinner, play, drinks, etc. a rare night out with friends. They were a bit older and only seemed to go out once a week or month when they had time in their schedules. They included working professionals and retirees.

2. The second group was more adventurous. They seemed to attend more art related events in general, but indicated that new plays often strike a deeper chord than "performance art". This group was younger and seemed to do more entertainment activities more frequently than those in the first group (several times per week). They did not link going to a new play to an entire evening but seemed to indicate it was just something to do as a part of their day, whether with friends or not. This group included young professionals and students. The one similarity was the "we saw it first" attitude.

This was a great opportunity to talk about what drives our patrons that we do not normally get to do. We have decided to institute a quarterly focus group to chat with members and single ticket buyers so that we may continue to expand our understanding of how to make their comprehensive experiences with us better.

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AS: Theater-going audiences are remarkably intelligent, well-read, and well-informed.

Theater-going audiences have curiosity as to how theater is made.

KN: Even knowing that this was a small sample, I think this process was a good reminder that theatre artists often do work in a bit of a bubble. What this means in terms of moving forward is a trickier question, but it is always good to be reminded when one is in a bubble. We can still be leaders as artists, but it does behoove us to know who our audience is and what they want.