

Triple Play: Phase 1 Highlights by Emma Jaster

Aggregated Notes by Emma Jaster on the initial six-city tour

These notes are broken down into sections by the following emergent themes:

1. RISK
2. AUDIENCE
3. QUALITATIVE ENGAGEMENT
4. PARTICULAR VALUE OF LIVE THEATRE
5. TIME/PROCESS
6. EXCELLENCE
7. NEW WORK
8. ARTIST ENGAGEMENT
9. INSTITUTION ENGAGEMENT/RESPONSIBILITY
10. QUESTIONS FOR THE AUDIENCES

1. RISK

What makes it risky? Is it just that it's new? A lot of people brought up the vastness of the term, wanting to know how we are defining risk for the purpose of this study.

- Aesthetic risk vs box office risk. Are they the same? What are the risks for the artists? It can be risky bc there's a large cast. But also new plays by or about people of color. (NY)
- Risk is also about the way of storytelling; breaking the fourth wall, music, puppetry, and other mediums intersecting. (NY)
- If you're intellectually engaged, you're more likely to take risk: readers, writers, bloggers, etc. (NY)
- Secret cinema in England; This model opposes the research showing that telling the audience the plot first makes it better. We seem worried about risk, but maybe we need to say this is a great experience, come along with us. (Chicago)
- The Fringe intentionally markets risk: you are gonna see something crazy. If you are ready to gamble, come on! If not, it's not gonna work for you. (DC)
- If it's a half hour show, across the street, and \$5 then my risk tolerance is really pretty high. But if it's across town and \$120, it better be guaranteed to be pretty damn good. (Chicago)
- Moneyback guarantee program. We had a super risky show. Should have called it "Big Risk, Big Reward." Some people were upset b/c you shouldn't be able to return art. Art shouldn't be a commodity. But the conversation around that made people come see the show. Maybe 4 out of a thousand people asked for their money back. Lowers the risk. Once they're in the door, they're glad to be there. (Chicago)

2. AUDIENCE

The discussion around audiences focused primarily on how to reach new audiences, and with that, more diverse audiences. How might this relate to new work? Can new work lead us to these much-sought new audiences?

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- How do we get the people who aren't going to want to? (SF)
- Go to the audience rather than trying to convince them to come to us. (LA)
- We've quadrupled our theaters, but not our audiences. How do we expand them? I think the best way to do that is with new work that is responding to what's happening now, to their lives. (Chicago)
- There's a difference between having a really good experience and seeing a really good show. Our experienced audience members know & embrace this. Newer ones might not trust that yet. (SF)
- Content and form are going to be far more influential than marketing to get that diversity in.
- Younger audiences come because the work is cheaper but also if the work reflects them and their lives (NY)
- Plays about white men promote themselves as if they are reflecting you. Plays about women or colored people present themselves as a window into "them." (LA)
- We want diversity of audience for a broader conversation, and to know if our work is speaking to the things that matter to our world... Right now we're just speaking to the theater class. Can we be part of a larger cultural conversation or movement? (NY)

3. QUALITATIVE ENGAGEMENT

We've learned from Counting New Beans that the experience before, after, around the event of the play helps to increase the impact of the work. But does everyone want to expand their experience? For those that do want it, what are the best practices in doing this? How much and how? Several cities mentioned the need for a range of levels of engagement so everyone can participate at their own comfort level.

- Movie trailers have the whole story in there so before you go you already know what you're going for. Maybe that's what we need for theater. A quick fun way to fully familiarize with the story before you commit to a ticket (DC)
- Susan Lori Parks "watch me work" she invites people to come in and watch her each week. Then its really interesting for the organization to reach out to those people and invite them in for the production (NY)
- Pre and post show needs to be as charismatic as the show itself. Talkbacks have not been so successful, but people stay in the lobby forever. We don't want to dictate the terms of the conversation (Chicago)
- Talk-*with* vs talk-back (DC)
- If we can barely get them to the reading, how do we get them to do that and eight other activities? (Chicago)

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- Playwrights Horizons is throwing parties. Not just tweets etc. How do we generate content that is not the art but towards the art? Minimal time and effort from them but keeps them involved. How do we make it special so they feel they're really in on something. (Chicago)
- **Being a practitioner is the deepest possible level of engagement. Can we do that with the work that we already make? Can we create the moment of making for audiences? (Chicago)**
- Dramaturgical research. If you have quotes from people in the community that then go into the script, those people are most likely to come to the show. (Chicago)
Video games have a vocabulary setup to define you as an active participant rather than a passive observer. What can we ask our audience to do in order to truly be a participant? People don't want to be passive observers these days. (Chicago)
- **We don't necessarily know how people want to engage. Tried to reach out to kids w/ social media. They mostly ignored it and instead found one of the actors on facebook and then joined that actor at a party that night. They wanted to connect directly with the artist. And they can! (Chicago)**
- We have found it very helpful to engage our audience with our process. They give feedback and then they come back to see if their feedback made a difference. Civilians are curious about how the work is developed, so they feel like they're buying into something. (LA)
- Our entire rehearsal process is free and open in the public park. People stop and watch and then they begin to follow us. They become very engaged, come to the show, bring friends, engage with us after and can speak intelligently about the work. (LA)
- Conversation has to be a part of the event. The more that happens, the more people say- that was a great conversation. You've digested it, and are more likely to talk about it w someone who wasn't there. (LA)
- Clubbed Thumb: find a social ringleader for each show: leader of the baseball team. Lots of overlap b/w our artists and audiences. Much of our audience is in the field. We put a lot of thought into the social experience of the theater- who will go with whom, what are the social groups that could bring each other? (NY)
- We have to identify an audience to understand what their needs are and then create the show in a way that they can access it. It's not just about tickets, they need bus fare and childcare, and dinner. How do we address that? They have curfews, lines they wait in to find a place to sleep or get something to eat. (LA)

4. TIME & PROCESS

Everyone's talking about developing relationships. How much time does this take? And how do we accommodate for that given the current production structure?

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- It's very rare that somebody invites you to a new thing, you go, and then you're converted. It takes a long time. (LA)
- A lot of successes when there's a long development period, long relationship b/w artist and theater. 1-3yrs (NY)
- The show is different a year before the show starts. How do you reconcile that with marketing? When it's new and unknown and changing? (Chicago)
- In Europe and South America, they don't have an assembly line like we do here. In order to change the form, you have to get everyone in the room at the beginning, before you decide where you're going. Let the ensemble form early and be a part of the generative process. This is not how we're used to working. If we want to do work like Sleep No More, which has young people coming back over and over again, having paid for expensive tickets. (Chicago)
- If we want to get the whole team together early, why not involve the audience then too? (Chicago)

5. THE PARTICULAR VALUE OF LIVE THEATRE

Many people touched on the issue of theater's value in today's society. Are we here to build community? Or if it's entertainment, what makes us unique? In the face of this question, our investigation of living artists seems especially relevant. What are we offering? And in the vast variety of our field, what do we all share? Live performers with a live audience. Can our artistic process help? Why is this triangular relationship so important? Because the one thing that all theater shares is live artists with a live audience. That defines our value. How can we highlight and make the most of that?

- Theater needs to do what theater does best- get people together in a room and tell not just others stories but the stories of the people in our community. We're doing shows about our community's questions: violence, education, cancer. Our post-show retention has improved astronomically. (Chicago)
- We have to be attentive in our programming to see that we are doing things that only theater can do. Don't present a Rom-Com that they can see in a movie... Do something truly theatrical with a real connection to an audience. We have to show especially newer audiences that this is a whole different art form. (LA)
- **The one thing all theater has in common is the connection between live performer and live audience. That is the single unifying factor.** (SF)
- We live increasingly isolated from one another. So it's also our job to recreate the idea of what community is. Not just reaching into existing communities. We have to connect with them in a way that is more audience-involved than just talking to them from the stage. How can we create community? (LA)

6. EXCELLENCE

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Yes we all want to support new and risky work, but not just for the sake of being new. We also need to maintain a professional standard of excellence.

- It's hard to describe "what is theater" now. all of these alternative ways of theater making- what does it do to our standards of excellence, standards of training, etc.? (NY)
- People have plenty of risk-tolerance, just no tolerance for bad theater. We often assume all theater is good and so all people should be going. But it's just not true. There are plenty of bad productions. The harder thing is to say, ok, this play isn't all that good. People aren't coming, not because of bad marketing or ignorant audiences, but simply because it's not that good. Let's pick up and try something else. (Chicago)
- If we have lots of people now coming in for single experiences, what if they happen to see something bad the first time? How do we let them know there are other shows and it's not always like this. (Chicago)
- Risk is a question of quality. People want to know if it will be good. I go to theater bc somebody I respect told me it was good. (LA)

7. NEW WORK

If we are talking about the triangular relationship, it means the generative artist needs to be living and able to participate to some extent in the process. Maybe that's how we define what's "new."

- Why are we defining it as "risky"? Why not fresh, relevant, current, responsive, modern? New. (DC)
- We are talking about "new play" as a finite genre rather than the wide and diverse medium full of great variety that it is. In fact it is as diverse as "music." Who doesn't like music? We just all have different taste for different types within that. (DC)
- For some theaters, everything they produce is new. You don't have to flag a single piece as the "new thing". You've changed the baseline. Are we talking about seasons of risk or canons of risk as opposed to a new play here and there? (NY)
- Sharing the plot puts the new play on the same footing as a classic for which you are likely to already know the story. (Chicago)
- People are applying to a new works festival with plays that have already been produced elsewhere. They do it bc they want an existing press packet. How do you apply with a world premiere that has never been produced? (Chicago)
- In the new work field, a 3rd production of a show is still really, really valuable. (Chicago)
- Children's theater: everything is "new" for these audiences (SF)
- New does not necessarily equate risky, nor vice versa. (SF)

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8. ARTIST ENGAGEMENT

- I want to do your work, but it's a hard sell. What can we do? Set up a residency for her to spend a year getting to know the audience, work with them, run workshops etc, then she writes a play knowing their audience. That's a show we can sell. And it takes care a lot of outreach and engagement for the theater. (NY)
- Make the event about who the people are, not just artists but also the designers and folks in the building. They're the ones who truly love the work and of course we should want them to meet the audience and vice versa. The audience comes for the cheese and wine and socializing, not to be taught something or educated. (NY)
- We are changing our demographic not by targeting ticket buyers but by targeting artists. I get them to work with my artists and then they bring their own audience. (NY)
- I'll never get big celebrities to come and perform at my little theaters, but I can make celebrities. So I can make celebrities out of playwrights. Having a playwright come to a gala in our little town is far more exciting than in NY. I am going to invest in a human being, get this playwright to be a part of our community. (NY)
- Some artists are great communicators, others are terrible. Artists may say they could help, but would they actually be good at it? i.e. "Here's your twitter acct, go for it!" (SF)
- We live in an increasingly transparent world, incumbent on us to be more open. We'd be foolish not to ask the artist about talkbacks or marketing etc. (SF)
- Artist: a theater claims they can't do my work b/c they know their audience. But I know my work and I know it'll succeed. We all need to bring our best selves to the table. (SF)
- There's a generational shift. A tangible difference : artists under age 45 have different feelings about the preciousness of their work- they will automatically reach out to audiences. Older ones won't. We as institutions don't need to manage this b/c it will happen automatically. (SF)
- Have more common spaces where both artists and audience hang out after the show. (SF)

9. INSTITUTION ENGAGEMENT & RESPONSIBILITY

Theaters pairing with each other allow upward mobility for new work. Smaller theaters bring in new, specific audiences. Larger theaters allow larger audiences, longer runs, greater resources. Small theater does the experimenting, large then has a smaller risk.

- People want to go to places where they're welcome, not where they feel used for a grant funding one-off. Commitment comes over time and seasons. Don't use us for our diversity and expect us to bring the audience and then when it's not full, you say ok you're done. People try once, it doesn't work and then they're done(LA)
- **Make the atmosphere more familiar so that the content can be more risky.** (DC)

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- There's a need and desire to hang out after and around the theatrical venue. Mexico has restaurants attached to many of their theaters. Make actors less of an exclusive club, and more a part of the structure, more like the café/bar scene. (DC)
- **When does the edifice help? Yes it's a new work, but we are established and we say its ok, so you can trust us, don't worry, come see something new (Chicago)**
- I'm providing some financial relief for a company to produce a new work, so I want them to really push their risk. Do something you couldn't otherwise do. (Chicago)
- Institutional fortitude to say ok, this wasn't a crowd pleaser, but the artists really executed their vision as they ought to have and I'm going to go ahead and invest in them, commission them to come back next season and rely on that to make up for this. Ticket sales is not our only measure of success. (Chicago)
- **As theaters, we are accountable to the public and to the artist. It may be risk-taking for the audience, but also risky for the theater. The only way we can take those risks is to develop a funding community that supports that. It's not going to come from ticket sales. We need to educate those funders and advocate for their support of risk across the board. (Chicago)**
- Differing opinions on inter-institutional support: Please go to see shows in other theaters bc it will make you smarter and more prepared to be adventurous here. vs: people who go only to our theater give more to us. Those who go to many theaters are spread thin. (SF)
- **The theater can bring the audience- they know their audience. (SF)**

10. QUESTIONS FOR AUDIENCES

Theaters and artists alike had a lot of questions they would like to ask their audiences, and the potential audiences that aren't yet with us. So far we have primarily spoken with two of the three corners of our triangle. Here's some of what they want to know from the third.

- Do you pay attention to critics? Do you read them? What difference does it make for you? Many of our students read their reviews on Goldstar, not from professionals. (LA)
- Did all of the lobby exhibit work make a difference? (LA)
- If you could read this play before coming to see it, would you be more likely to come see it? (LA)
- What did you expect from this performance? What was that based on? Was there a disconnect b/w this and what you expected? What was the impact of that disconnect? (LA)
- People who don't go often, why did you choose to go to this? The person who got them there, what convinced them? What was their successful argument? (LA)
- Proximate learning: does it have to be my story that I go see? How and when can I move to being interested in seeing other people's stories? (LA)

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- How much do you know about the playwright? How much is the image presented by the producers vs. developed by the audience themselves? (LA)
- What engagement activities led to greater conversation? How can they affect whether and how the audience talks about the work in the world? (Chicago)
- We are aware of when work is new- does the audience know? Do they care? Should they care? (SF)
- How do our assumptions compare to our audience's assumptions of what theater is? (SF)
- Why would an audience go to the theater vs. why do we want them to want to go? (SF)