

Triple Play: Phase 1 Highlights by Mark Blankenship

A summary of Mark's Triple Play notes and observations, grouped by recurring themes. Mark's personal observations are in bold text. Otherwise, all quotes/paraphrases are attributed to their city/cities.

How Are Theatres/Artists Engaging With Audiences?

Every city was thinking about WHEN to engage an audience in the process, with answers ranging from "years in advance" to "only after they've seen the show, so we don't tell them what to think."

Why are we not in the community asking people what they want to hear? (D.C.)

Can we engage with all artists and staff to get everyone on the same page about the aesthetic risks involved in any given show? Can that help us start the conversation with audiences VERY EARLY about the perceived audience for a piece? (NYC)

Can we be asking audiences about what they leave the theatre with, not just the reasons they come in the first place? (NYC)

Can audiences engage with ALL the artists on a show – designers, stage managers, etc. – and not just the playwright? Remember that for most people, those jobs are mysterious and exciting. (NYC)

One company elicited audience feedback during previews and then told later audiences how that feedback had been incorporated (SF)

Audiences don't care about world premieres. That concept is ego-driven from inside the theatre industry. Don't make me build a campaign around the pointless idea of a "world premiere." Let me sell the play. (Minneapolis)

One theatre finds that interactive pre- and post-show content is very successful. Lobby games. Twitter games. But at the same time, another pointed out that audiences might engage with ways we don't expect, by-passing a lobby Twitter kiosk and instead directly Tweeting an actor to see where the cast is hanging out after the show. (LA)

There's a tension between an artist's desire for an audience to have a "pure experience" and a theatre's desire to give an audience context. (LA)

Two companies had good experiences taking their work and their rehearsals to off-site venues like libraries and community centers, which made the work seem like a natural part of the neighborhood (LA)

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How Are Theatres/Artists Creating Audiences?

If you want more audiences, then you have to DECIDE who those audiences are. (D.C. and San Francisco and Chicago)

It's not just "find me the brown people." It's "find me the people who like non-linear stories or like running around during a show or want to be in a small group." (Minneapolis)

It's not just "put on the work." It's doing additional work to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable. (D.C.)

As playwrights, we have to be pro-active in identifying and recruiting the audiences we feel are best for our plays. The "Dentist Play" and "Cupcake Bakers" stories. (SF and Chicago)

Your play doesn't work as well if it doesn't have the right audience, and every play has a different "right audience." (D.C. and Chicago)

The Karen Z. story about her immigrant/minority-focused play in Denver (D.C.)

If you get a niche audience to a show about them, then what, if anything, do you tell them about the shows that aren't specifically about them? (D.C. and LA and NYC)

Why do you have to get everybody? If you only get your little niche, can you endure? (DC. and Minneapolis)

Theatres should be curating groups of people who can go to the theatre together and trying to curate pre and post-show experiences for those groups (NYC and SF)

In a social media world, the playwright can come in immediately---from the moment of production commitment---to talk about marketing images that will be broadcast. (SF)

How can we "re-tweet" a play to get it on the radar of people who don't regularly go to the theatre? (SF)

How can we make sure that the play is connected to what's happening outside the theatre? That it feels like part of the things people care about and not some isolated experience over here? (SF)

Finding

What Does "Theatre" Mean to People? // Community Relevance

Every city is worried that people aren't even aware that theatre is an option---that it doesn't even occur to them to go. AWARENESS is a big factor here.

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There are people who like things but don't realize that the theatre can be a medium for discussing that interest. (D.C.)

Is the word "play" a pejorative? Is the word "theatre" a pejorative? (D.C.)

How do we market the experience? Is Formal vs. Informal? Is it only for a Special Occasion? (SF)

What's the difference between what insiders think theatre is for and what audiences think theatre is for? (SF)

Is theatre cool? Does it feel like it matters to the rest of what's happening in someone's life? (SF)

Does theatre seem like an elite community that only certain people can access for reasons of training, money, class, background, etc.? (SF and Minneapolis)

How do we articulate the theatre's role in a particular community? Can we work with other community institutions to contextualize work and use work as a catalyst to do other things in a community? (SF and Chicago)

Are we allowing people to think of the theatre as a monolithic entity, when in fact, theatre is wildly diverse? (SF)

Why should audiences even care what we've got? We have to humble ourselves before them and try to be aware of their needs. We can't just arrogantly say, "Watch us! Love us! Come take whatever we're giving you!" But that's not the same as pandering to them or dumbing down our work. Caring about them and listening to them is not the same as pandering to them. (LA)

Find the intersection between the self-interests of the audience and the self-interests of the theatres/artists (LA)

How Are Theatres Discouraging Audiences?

Everyone in EVERY CITY is concerned about price as a barrier to entry. This is a MAJOR issue that should not be overlooked.

If I weren't in the theatre, I wouldn't go to the theatre because there are so many barriers. Ticket price. What do you wear. How do you get tickets. When does the performance start. Why do I have to get rid of my phone. (NYC)

Does curating one "black show" or one "young show" a season actually discourage people from caring about/trusting the artists, the company, the theatre itself? (NYC and LA)

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How often are we thinking of audiences as a monolithic thing, or trying to find a one-size-fits-all approach for talking to them? (SF)

Sometimes, even the wrong font on a website can make people think a show is stupid/boring/not for them. (Chicago)

There's a mindset that says thinking about the audience "too much" is tantamount to pandering them, but that doesn't have to be true. (Chicago)

Subscription Audiences

Is a subscription just a way of saying "We promise you'll understand this," thus inviting fury when things are challenging? (D.C.)

What have we habituated our audiences in expecting? How can we change what the habits are the we train them to maintain? (NYC)

Do we underestimate subscribers? Do artists give them an unfair shake, assuming they don't want to be challenged? (NYC and Chicago)

The subscription audience will have a better time if there are also specifically-curated audience members in the house for a particular show (D.C.)

How do you balance a season-long identity with the unique identity of each show? (Chicago)

What Do Theatres/Artists Want the Audience to Experience?

The theatre has to be willing to take a risk that people might dislike something. (D.C. and LA)

There's a contradiction between taking risks and trying to bury that fact in marketing materials (NYC)

Whom do the playwrights WANT to talk to? Is that different from who's actually coming? Are they reaching people they don't want to reach? (NYC)

We should be celebrating the idea that you're going to see things that make you uncomfortable or challenge you. Risk is great! (SF and LA)

We should be okay with getting one-time only audiences who aren't necessarily loyal to theatre companies but are loyal to particular artists or ideas. (Chicago)

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Can we ask audiences where else they go and what else they do? That could give us a sense of what they're willing to pay for. (Chicago)

Is content even relevant to a younger audience when compared to the opportunity to do or experience things? (The "dress up like zombies" show. The idea that the play is not the endpoint, but just one aspect of an overall experience.) (Minneapolis and Los Angeles)

Audiences should be reminded it's okay not to have an opinion right away. That they can reflect. (LA)

Does engagement even matter? And if you were brought by a friend, then how did your friend convince you to come? (LA)

When see theatre that's impactful, did it impact you or your perception of your community? (LA)

How Are Audiences Engaging With Theatre/Artists/Each Other?

Audiences are upset when they come with an expectation of understanding and, aesthetically, they don't understand. (D.C.)

Are audiences afraid of making the wrong value choice? Do they risk judging themselves for making the wrong cultural choice? (D.C.)

One theatre says that talkbacks are only successful when the audiences talk to each other. (Chicago)

In a talkback, does the audience feel it's their job to tell the artists what's wrong with a show? Does it actually limit conversation to have the playwright in the room? (Chicago)

It's humbling to remember that audiences mostly want to talk to each other after a show, not the artists (Minneapolis)

One company takes audiences to dinner and invites them to discuss the show with each other, even if the show is not at their theatre. (Minneapolis)

One company says its audience is "risk-seeking" so long as the show still delivers on the PERCEIVED PROMISES of a company. Meaning: Give us a show about a specific culture, like you promised, and you can take a lot of aesthetic risks. (Minneapolis)

Creating a certain type of consistency---around form or content or theme---allows for you to take risks in other places. If you always do plays by women, as promised, then you may be free to push other boundaries so long as you don't produce a male playwright. Your audience will still feel they've been given what they were promised. (Minneapolis)

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The frustration of performing for an audience that watches everything the same way, that "knows how to behave in a theatre" before it arrives (Minneapolis)

Cooperation Among Theatres

This idea was regularly raised, though there wasn't always a lot of concrete discussion about what it meant. In general, most cities wondered aloud whether they could all be helping each other more to boost attendance and awareness.

Three companies are trading free tickets among everyone's audiences. If you pay for Theatre A, you can get a free ticket to Theatre B, etc. (LA)

A company called Southern Theatre, overseen by Damon Runnells, is uniting 14 companies in a "Netflix model," where you buy one subscription but get to choose among 14 different theatres. (Minneapolis)

Miscellaneous Comments of Interest

MANY people pointed out that artistic excellence is one of the most important factors in building audiences

What should be stop doing to make room for new approaches? (D.C.)

One factor in NYC is the amount of time people have. How many times will people look at a particular project? Will they see a rehearsal then never come back? (NYC)

Every play is a "start-up," and every play is "organic, hand-made, and local." You can engage with communities who get excited by those ideas in other arenas. (SF)

If artists don't get paid much (or at all) to do engagement work, then how much can we expect them to do? (Chicago)

When we talk about risk, are we talking about aesthetic/formal risks? Structural/thematic risks? (Minneapolis)

We operate our theatre with the fine dining idea that service begins as you pull up to the curb. We'll wave at you before you get out of your car. (LA)