

Triple Play: Schwimmer-Voss Research

Preliminary Summary of Theatre Development Fund's Survey of Playwrights and Theatre Leaders

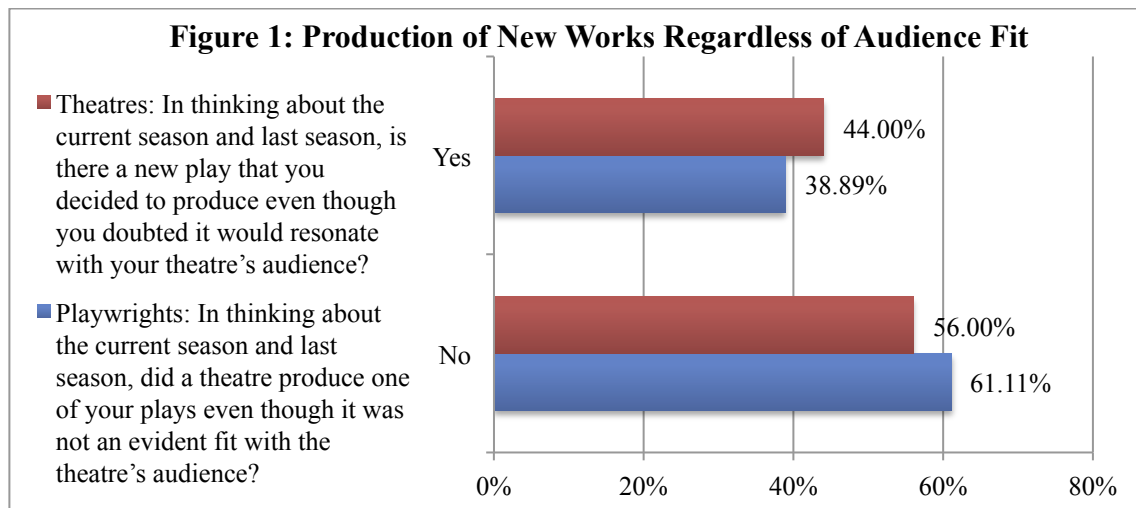
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SMU National Center for Arts Research
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Methodology

51 theatre leaders and 84 playwrights responded to the electronic survey (two of the theatre leaders were from the same organization between December 19, 2013 and January 23, 2014). The fifteen questions on the two surveys were similar in nature but varied slightly in wording to account for and capture the differences in perspectives between playwrights and theatre leaders. Each question asked about new work development, theatre leadership policy and audiences for new works. In the surveys sent to theatre leaders, respondents were asked to comment on their own attitudes and policies towards new work, cultivating audiences, and audience makeup at their own theatres. In the surveys sent to playwrights, respondents were asked to comment on the same with regard to both theatres where their work had been performed, and theatres more generally. These surveys sought to delve more deeply into the root causes and manifestations of the discrepancies between theatre and playwright perspectives discovered in previous surveys, which formed the basis of *Outrageous Fortune*, published by Theatre Development Fund.

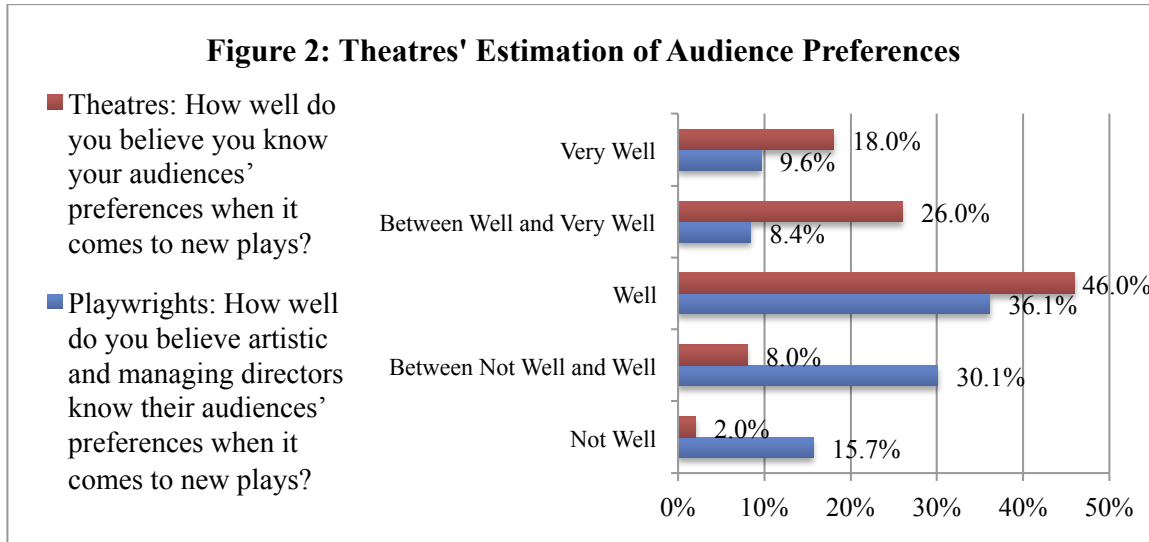
New Play Production

Theatre leaders were asked whether there was a new play that their theatres had produced within the last two seasons even though they doubted it would resonate with the theatre's audience. Playwrights, similarly, were asked whether any theatre had produced one of their plays within the last two seasons, even though it was not an evident fit with that theatre's audience. The results in this case were fairly consistent and there was no statistically significant difference between the responses, though theatre leaders responded more positively as a whole (see Figure 1). Forty-four percent of theatre respondents said that they had produced such a play, while 38.89% of playwright respondents said that they had such a play produced. Playwrights fairly accurately assess the extent to which theatres produce their work even when it is not an evident fit with the theatre's audience.



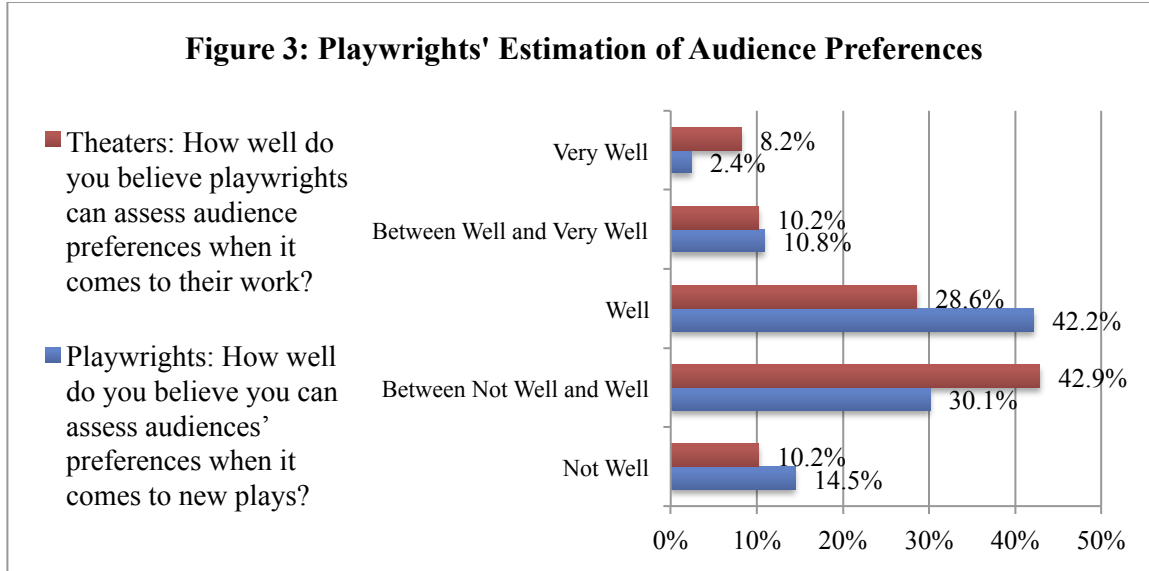
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The follow-up questions involved exploring how well theatres and playwrights believe they themselves understand audience tastes, and how well they believe the other group understands audience tastes. There were five response choices anchored by “Not well” and “Very well” with “Well” being the central option (see Figure 2). Ninety percent of theatre respondents believe that they know their audiences either “Well,” “Between well and very well,” or “Very well.” On the other hand, only 54.1% of playwrights perceived theatres’ knowledge of their audiences in one of those three categories. This represents a significant difference in average perceptions: the average playwright response falls just shy of “Well” whereas the average theatre leader’s response was just above “Well”.

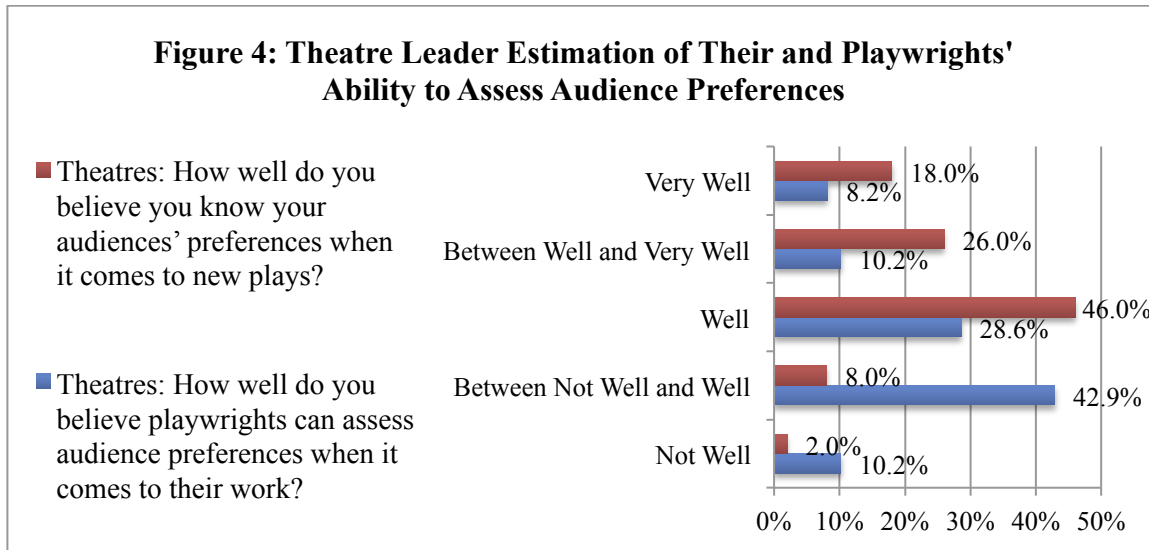


Playwrights, meanwhile, were much less confident in their ability to assess audience preferences, and theatre leaders indicated their uncertainty about whether playwrights are able to accurately evaluate the artistic preferences of audiences. Only 13.2% of playwrights answered either “Between well and very well,” or “Very well” when asked how well they believed they can assess audience preferences when it comes to new plays. Similarly, only 18.4% of theatres selected one of these two choices as their assessment of how well playwrights can assess audience preferences when it comes to new work. The average responses from playwrights and theatre leaders were nearly identical, falling just below “Well”.

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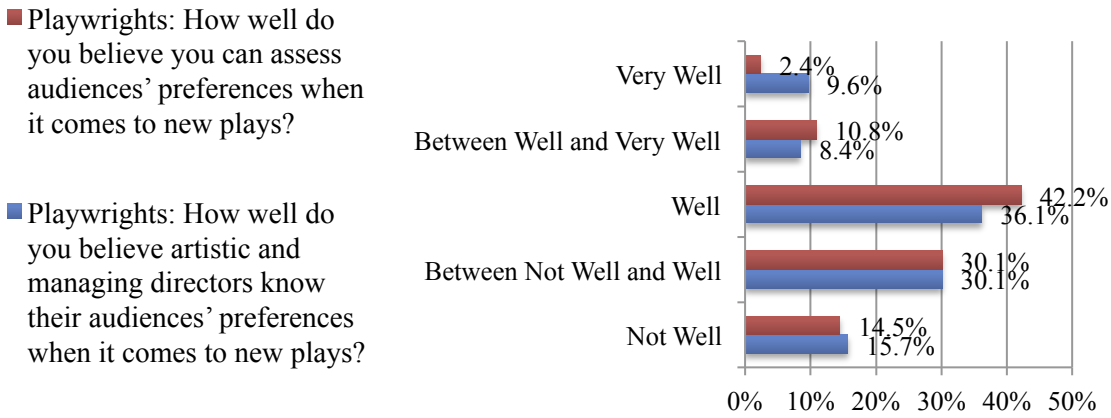


Combining responses to these two questions, we can get a cross-sectional sense of the extent to which theatre leaders and playwrights believe they are equally capable of assessing audience preferences (see Figures 4 and 5). Figure 4 shows that theatre leaders have a significantly higher level of confidence in their knowledge of audience preferences for new plays than do playwrights. Playwrights, on the other hand, tend to believe that they and theatre leaders are on similar par in their ability to assess audience preferences; there is no significant difference in their average response to the two questions (see Figure 5). Nearly 87% of them responded "not well," "between not well and well," or "well" when asked how well they could assess audiences' preferences when it comes to new plays. Similarly, 81.9% of the respondents chose one of these three answers when it came to how well theatres could assess audiences' preferences.



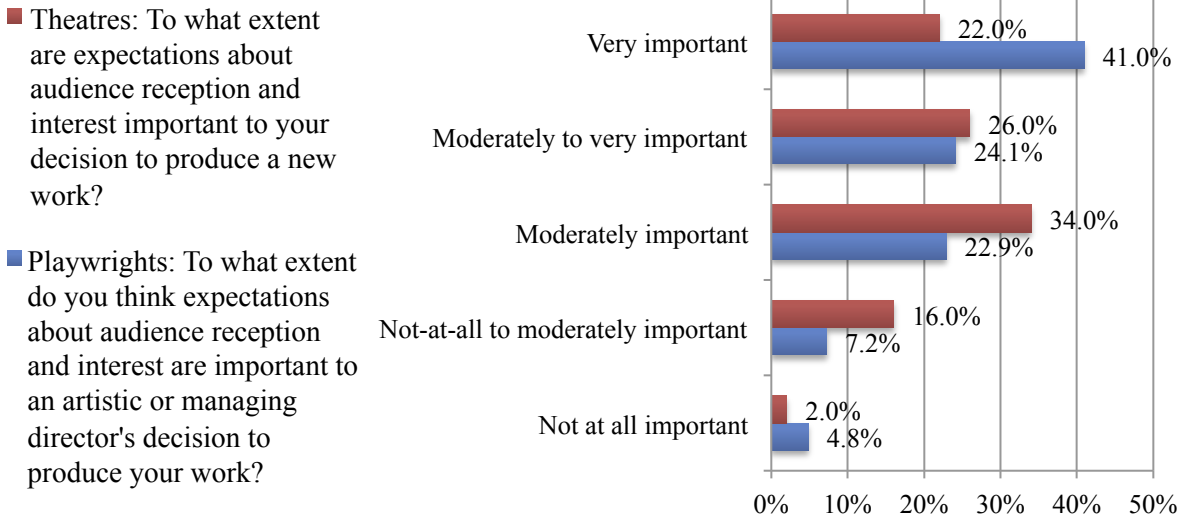
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Figure 5: Playwright Estimation of Their and Theatre Leaders' Ability to Assess Audience Preferences



The follow-up question inquired about the extent to which expectations about audience reception and interest are important to a theatre's decision to produce a new work. Between theatre leaders and playwrights, the average answer to this question differed somewhat (see Figure 6), with the average theatre leader placing slightly lower emphasis on audience reception and interest than playwrights expect. Playwrights are more likely to perceive that audience reception and interest are "very important" to an artistic or managing director's decision to produce new work than the theatre leader tends to say it is (41% v. 22%, respectively). A greater percentage of theatres responded that audience reception and interest were "not at all important," "not-at-all to moderately important" or "moderately important" (52%) than playwrights (34.9%).

Figure 6: Audience Reception and Interest



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Means of cultivation

The next set of questions sought to more thoroughly explore the most common practices theatres are employing to cultivate new-work audiences. These were juxtaposed in the playwrights’ surveys with questions seeking to know what methods playwrights viewed as most valuable for cultivating audiences for new plays (see Table 1).

Presented with a list of possible events and opportunities, the playwrights were asked the extent to which they agreed that such methods would be valuable. Their choices were “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” We found that, despite some discrepancies in the prioritization, theatres are frequently employing most of the methods that playwrights think are most valuable, and rarely employing those methods that playwrights think are least useful. Below is a list of the methods, as ranked by theatres, from most-frequently employed, to least-frequently employed, and the corresponding ranking by playwrights; the numbers in parentheses represent the percentage of theatres that reported utilizing each of the methods. Following is the list of methods playwrights view as most valuable, with those that were listed as valuable most frequently placed at the top, and the corresponding ranking by theatres in parentheses.

Table 1: Audience Cultivation Activities

Rank order of the ways in which theatres most frequently cultivate audiences for new plays	Rank by playwrights of same activity
1. Inviting audiences to participate in pre- or post-show discussions of new plays (92%)	4
2. Inviting audiences to share their perspectives on what they find interesting (78%)	5
3. Inviting audiences free of charge to be present at readings of new plays (64%)	1
4. Inviting audiences to meet the playwright before the production (58%)	2
T5. Inviting audiences free of charge to be present at workshops of new plays (50%)	3
T5. Inviting audiences to share their perspectives on what kind of work they find compelling (50%)	6
7. Inviting audiences to share their dis/comfort regarding new play structure or content (48%)	7
8. Inviting paying audiences to be present at workshops of new plays (47%)	9
9. Inviting paying audiences to be present at readings of new plays (38%)	8
Rank order of most valuable ways of cultivation in eyes of	Rank by

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playwrights	theatres of same activity
1. Inviting audiences free of charge to be present at readings of new plays	3
2. Inviting audiences to meet the playwright before the production	4
3. Inviting audiences free of charge to be present at workshops of new plays	5 (tied)
4. Inviting audiences to participate in pre- or post-show discussions of new plays	1
5. Inviting audiences to share their perspectives on what they find interesting	2
6. Inviting audiences to share their perspectives on what kind of work they find compelling	5 (tied)
7. Inviting audiences to share their dis/comfort regarding new play structure or content	7
8. Inviting paying audiences to be present at readings of new plays	9
9. Inviting paying audiences to be present at workshops of new plays	8

The five methods of cultivation that appear the most valuable in the eyes of the playwrights are the five in which the largest percentage of theatres are engaging their audiences, albeit in a different order. If theatres want to engage audiences in the ways that playwrights think will be most helpful, more of them might consider inviting audiences free of charge to be present at readings of new plays (nearly 66% of playwrights surveyed either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that this would be a valuable means of cultivation), invite audiences to meet the playwright before the production (nearly 62%), and invite audiences free of charge to be present at workshops of new plays (56%). Among the least valuable methods in the eyes of the playwrights are inviting paying audiences to be present at workshops of new plays (32%), and inviting paying audiences to be present at readings of new plays (35%). It is interesting to note the disparity between the perceived effectiveness of inviting non-paying audiences, and inviting paying audiences to such events—by both theatres and playwrights. While 58% of theatre leaders said that they involve audiences by giving them the opportunity to meet the playwright before the production, 62% of playwrights said they either agreed or strongly agreed that this was a valuable method of cultivation. Of course, these are relatively small samples of both demographics, but the fact that the numbers are so consistent is probably a good indicator.

Development Process

The theatre respondents were asked to elaborate on their play development processes. They were asked “Do you open up the development process to interested members of your audience community through actors posting blogs?” and “Do you open up the development process to interested members of your audience community through bringing in audience members periodically throughout the play’s development process to talk about the play’s issues and topics?” Forty-two percent of theatre leaders said they have done the former, while 44.4% have tried the latter.

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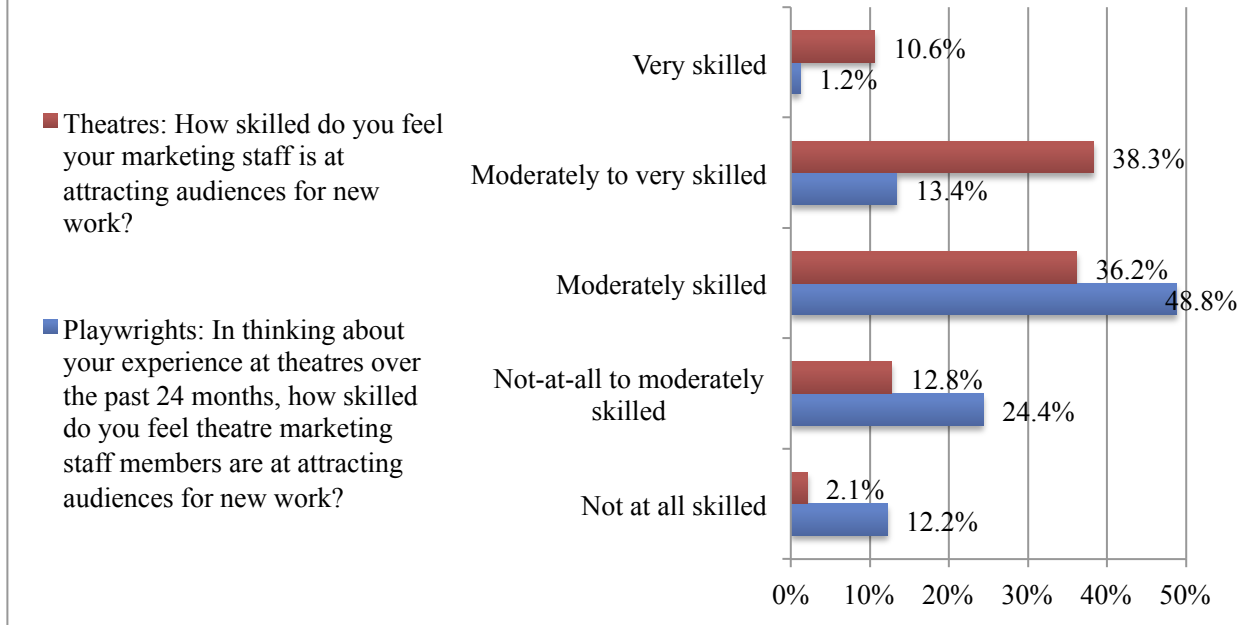
Several write-in responses deserve special note. One theatre respondent wrote, "We've expanded our new play development programs and increased the number of opportunities for audiences to witness/engage with presentations of works in earlier stages." Another responded, "We have talk-backs following all previews to get feedback which is incorporated into the production, we do a lot of new play readings on Monday evenings and Friday afternoons which give audiences a chance to be a part of the play development process with the playwright, before the play gets to production. We have a Locally Grown festival spotlighting new plays by local playwrights. We rarely have actors post blogs (we offer, but generally they don't take us up on it), but often the Theatre's staff or the director or playwright do blog about the development process. We also do open up the rehearsal process to lay leaders and donors." A third theatre respondent added that his or her theatre is "launching a new pass this season, the All-Access Pass, that will allow a select number of audience members to observe a process from start to finish--this season they will be a part of our Spring production ... attending rehearsals, production meetings and tech week, to see a full process in action." Multiple other theatres also replied that they have tried actor blogs, but they have not generated much interest, neither from the actors nor from audiences. One final response worth noting is from one theatre leader who remarks, "Our audiences include inmates, homeless people, and others of low-incomes. We think deeply about our audiences' responses to new plays because we want to ENGAGE them, not because we're worried about ticket sales. We have a hard time finding playwrights because we find most of them write for an upper-middle class audiences, without necessarily realizing it, because that is who usually comes to theatre."

Marketing Staff

The next questions sought to gain insight into theatre and playwright perceptions of the work that theatres' marketing staffs do to promote new works. The theatres were asked: "How skilled do you feel your marketing staff is at attracting audiences for new work?" The playwrights were asked: "In thinking about your experience at theatres over the past 24 months, how skilled do you feel theatre marketing staff members are at attracting audiences for new work?" There was a significant difference between theatre leaders and playwrights in the average response to the question. Results suggest that playwrights view theatre marketing teams as far less skilled at attracting audiences for new work than the theatres view their own marketing teams. Nearly half (48.9%) of the theatres surveyed rated their marketing teams as "moderately to very skilled" or "very skilled," while only 14.6% of playwrights did the same. A near-majority of playwrights (48.8%) answered "moderately skilled."

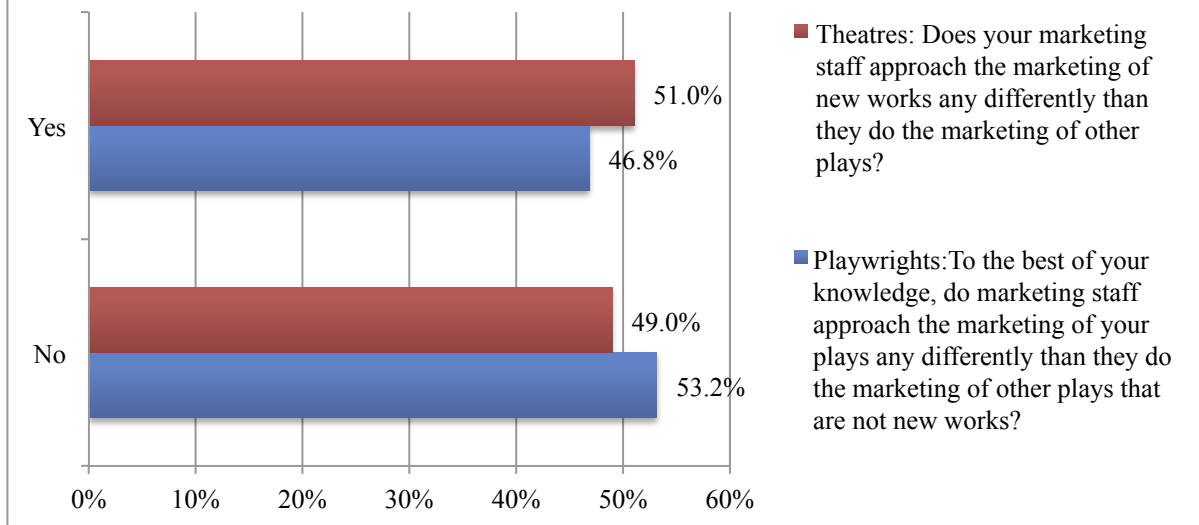
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Figure 7: Assessment of Marketing Staff Expertise and New Works



Next, theatres were asked whether their marketing staffs approach the marketing of new works any differently than the marketing of other plays. Playwrights were asked whether marketing staffs market their own plays any differently than other plays that are not new works. Both groups were split nearly down the middle when answering this question. 51% of theatres said that they do market new plays differently, while 49% said that they do not. Meanwhile, 46.8% of playwrights said they believe their plays are marketed differently, while 53.2% said they do not.

Figure 8: New Work Marketing



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This question also elicited the most write-in comments from the theatres. Many expounded upon their different marketing strategies. Several said they look for ways to incorporate more digital media into the marketing mix. One theatre leader wrote “We focus a lot more on digital media—less on the traditional avenues that a bigger, more traditional show might have.” Another wrote, “We begin by framing for audience and we do so more and more through social media. [We] send them Instagrams of [a] beautiful costume; do a Vine on words that are important themes, build expectations not to TELL them what they are seeing but to interest them in participating in the experience with us.” Many of the theatre respondents mentioned emphasizing tie-ins. One of them wrote, “Our audiences want tie-ins to the work, and name recognition is an easy tie-in. If the play is not known, they won't have that particular tie-in. Is the writer known? If so, we will attempt to [attach] a tag-line to the work that says something about the writer, as in ‘from the Pulitzer-Prize-Winning writer of INSERT WELL KNOWN PLAY HERE.’ If neither the play nor writer is known, we miss out on those tie-ins. Either way, we have others we must cultivate, but unknown work does make the hard job harder.” Another wrote that the members of their marketing staff “push for star casting if at all possible to help find a hook and give the project that kind of endorsement for the potential ticket buyer...” Still another wrote, “When it comes to new work, our marketing staff works harder to communicate WHAT the play is about, and to highlight certain selling points that may help grab audiences attention, such as a specific actor, director, or timely subject matter.” One theatre leader offered, “We highlight when a play is a world, American, or regional premiere. Any awards the play wins are also featured. We tend to try to reach more targeted audiences that might be interested in a play's subject matter rather. We also feature content on our website about the playwright.”

Two of the theatre respondents specifically mentioned involving the playwright in the marketing of the play. One of these wrote that the members of their marketing staff “promote the playwright more since many new plays have no title recognition and audiences usually aren't familiar with the playwrights. They also ask the playwright for feedback about how their play is being positioned from a marketing point of view.” The other wrote, “they attempt to get interviews with the playwright in the press so that the audience feels informed before attending.”

Many of the theatres described marketing strategies for new works that were more involved than for those for their other plays, often including deeper segmenting of the target audience. One theatre leader wrote that the members of the marketing department “segment our audience data base and give the previous buyers of new work the inside track on the new show with custom messages, draw up a list of affinity groups to sell to and organize community conversations both in advance of the actual run and pre/post show events with thought leaders around the subject matter/ story that is being told...” Another described, “The audience outreach for new plays is very targeted based on the content and issues of the play, and marketing strategies are often multiple and segmented depending on the range of issues addressed in the play.” Another writes that the marketing efforts for a new work include “less traditional advertising, more niche and grassroots awareness efforts and targeted direct mail.”

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Composition of Audiences

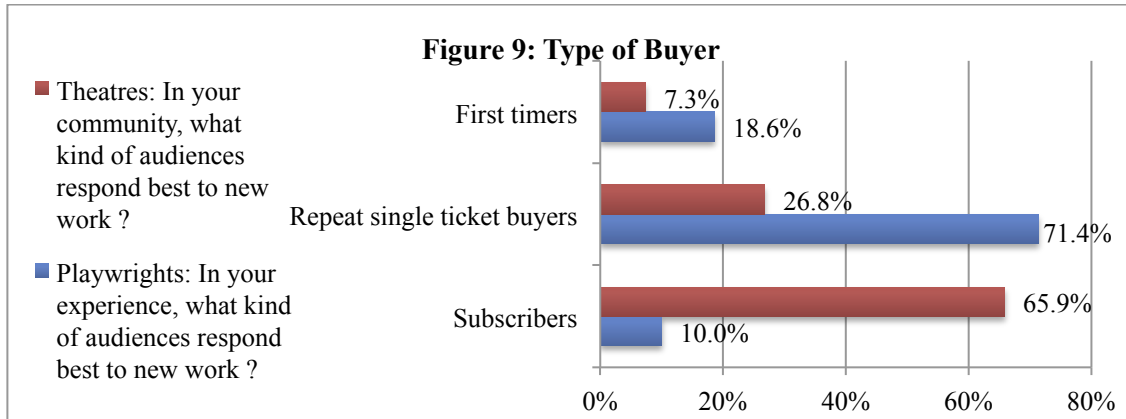
Both sets of respondents were asked to comment on the types of audience members they believe respond best to new plays in their respective communities. They responded with regards to multiple classifications, including type of buyer (subscriber, repeat single ticket buyer, or first timer); income level (upper, middle, or lower); gender (male or female); age (under 30, 30-45, 46-60, or over 60); highest education level (high school degree, undergraduate degree, or masters degree or higher); and ethnic makeup (ethnically diverse or ethnically homogeneous). It should be noted that eight of the theatre respondents opted not to answer any of these questions, and an additional seven only answered in one of the six categories. Many of these wrote in comments detailing that they either did not have the capacity to measure such audience characteristics, or felt uncomfortable putting such specific labels on something so dynamic as an audience.

Fourteen playwrights also opted not to answer any of the questions in this category. One playwright remarked, “Basically, I think that the less people have to pay a piece of theatre, the logistically easier it is to see, and the shorter the piece, the happier they are to see it and the “riskier” the work they’ll go in for. So...\$5 on their lunch break, less than an hour, super-happy to take a risk. Three hours on a beautiful Saturday, halfway across the city in rough traffic, or after a long day of work with work the next day, \$120 ticket, it better be something they read in high school, starring their favorite HBO character.” Another one of the playwrights who opted not to answer said, “The people who hate new exciting work the most are theatre people. In my experience the less involved in theatre people are the more accepting they are of formally challenging work and new work in general. It is only old people and theatre people PARTICULARLY critics and managing directors who think that we need to do old boring plays.” Most of the playwrights who didn’t respond commented that the “typical” audience really varied based on the specific new work. What follows is a sample of responses:

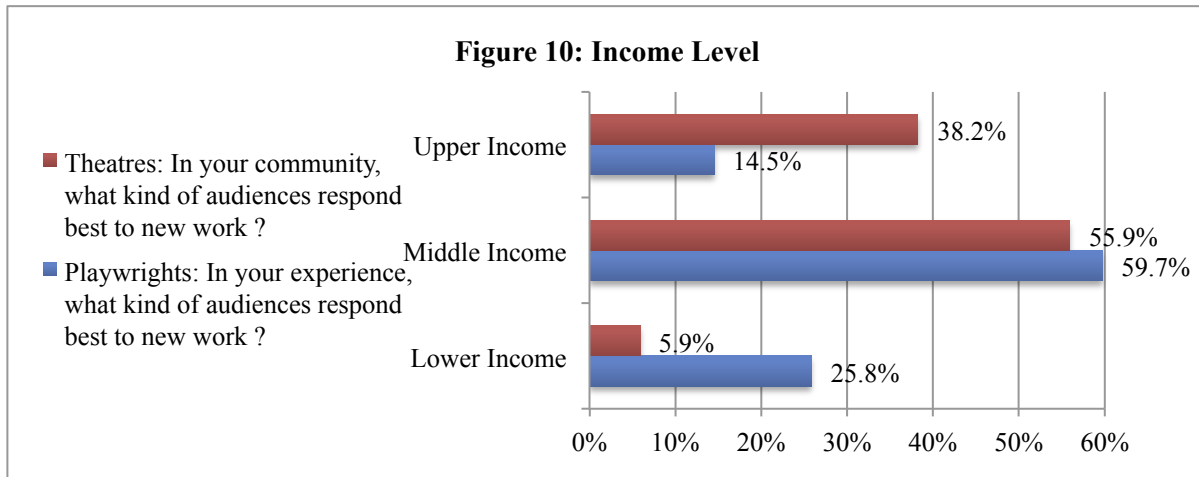
- “I am unable to answer the question, because how anyone responds to a new play depends on the new play they're attending.”
- “I really think an audience member interested in new work can come from any demographic.”
- “Depends on the type of new work, new work is a very broad category”
- “I think all kinds of people from all income brackets, ages, educational levels, ethnicities, and types of buyers like new plays- if the play speaks to them in some way.”

For the theatres and playwrights that *did* reply, the two groups overwhelmingly concurred that female audiences tended to respond better to new plays than male audiences. Over 90% of theatre leaders and 92.3% of playwrights believe this. For every other audience composition category, however, there was a significant degree of disagreement (see Figure 9). On the question of type of buyer, theatre respondents tend to believe that the more of a relationship the attendee has with the theatre, the more likely he or she is to be responsive to new works: 65.9% of theatre leaders said subscribers, 26.8% said repeat single ticket buyers, and just 7.3% said first timers. Conversely, nearly three-quarters (71.4%) of playwrights responded that repeat single ticket buyers were the most likely to attend new plays.

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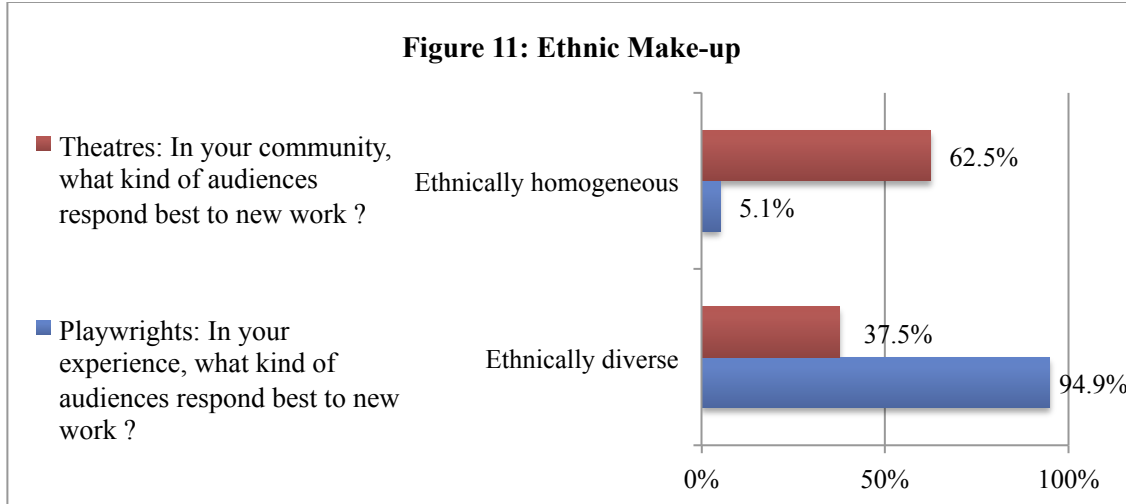


While both theatre leaders and playwrights both indicated that middle-income audience members respond better to new work than other income classes, the two groups did not converge on their assessments of upper income and lower income audiences and responsiveness to new work (see Figure 10). Only 5.9% of the theatres said that lower-income individuals responded best, as compared with 25.8% of playwrights. Meanwhile, a far greater percentage of theatre leaders (38.2%) than playwright respondents (14.5%) believe that individuals in the upper income level are most open to new works.

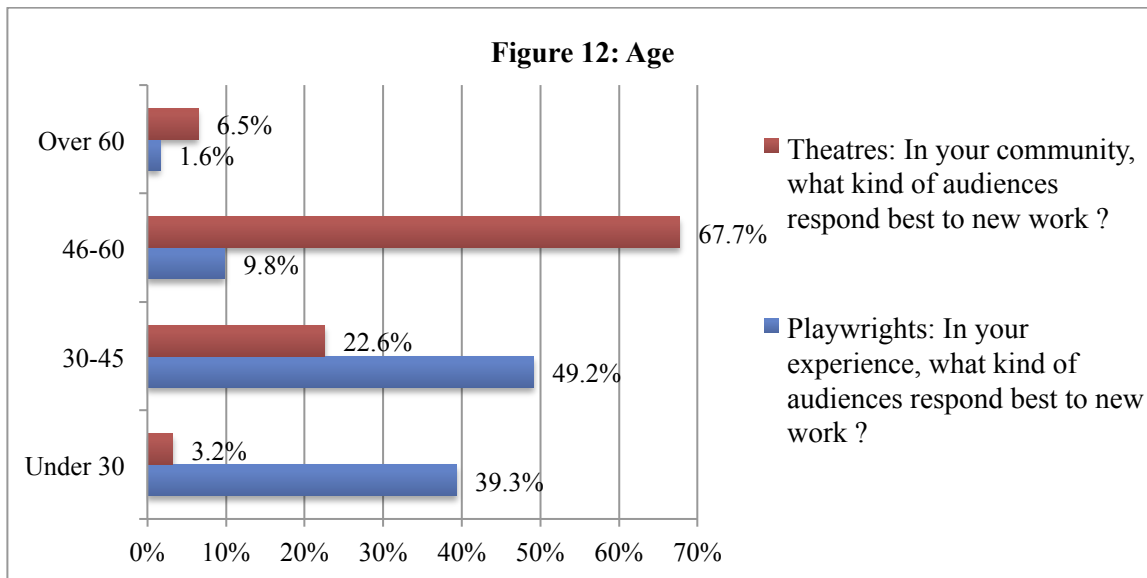


The two groups similarly did not agree as to the ethnic makeup of audiences that best respond to new work. The survey asked whether they thought these audiences were primarily "ethnically diverse" or "ethnically homogeneous." 62.5% of the theatre leaders surveyed said "ethnically homogeneous," while nearly 94.9% of the playwrights said "ethnically diverse."

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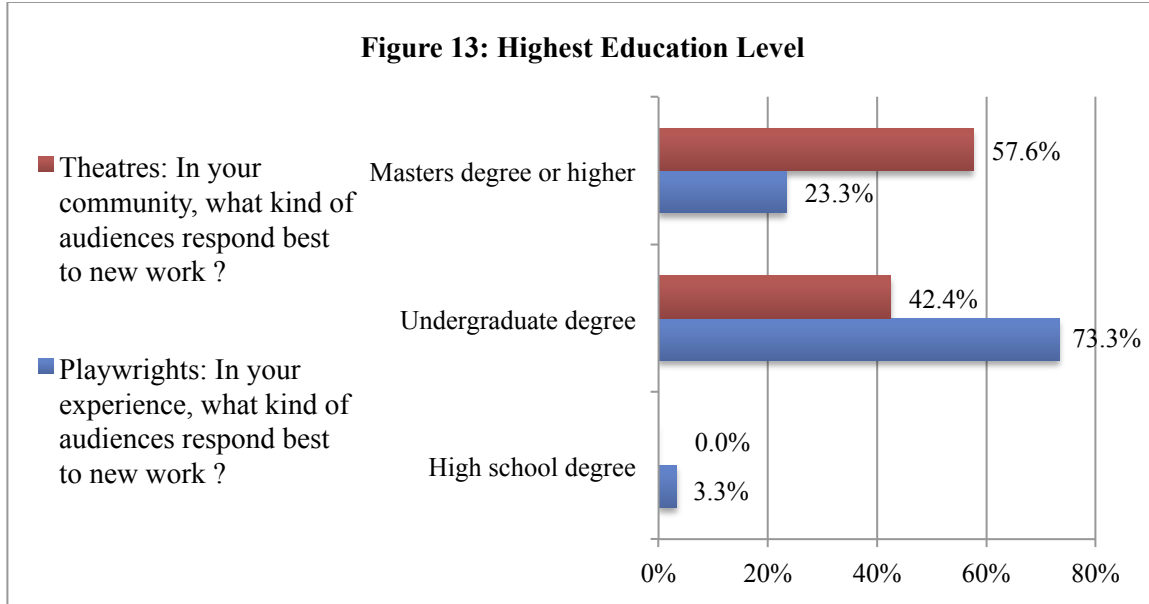


Large perceptual gaps also exist between the two groups with respect to the average age and education levels of the audience members they believe to be most responsive to new work. Only 1 of the 31 theatre leaders that answered this question believes that individuals under the age of 30 are the most responsive. In fact, 67.7% of theatre leaders said that the most responsive age group was between 46 and 60 years old. Conversely, playwrights tend to believe that the youngest audiences are also the most responsive. 39.3% of these respondent said "Under 30" while an additional 49.2% said "30-45."



Differences in responses were also found in the groups' answers to the question concerning the highest education level of audiences most responsive to new works. 57.6% of the theatre leaders said "Masters degree or higher" while 73.3% of playwrights responded "Undergraduate degree." There was consensus among the two groups that only a high-school diploma was not characteristic of their new-work fans.

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All in all, the audience for new works that the theatres depicted is older, better-educated, more financially comfortable, less ethnically diverse, and has attended the theatre more frequently than the audience depicted by the playwrights.

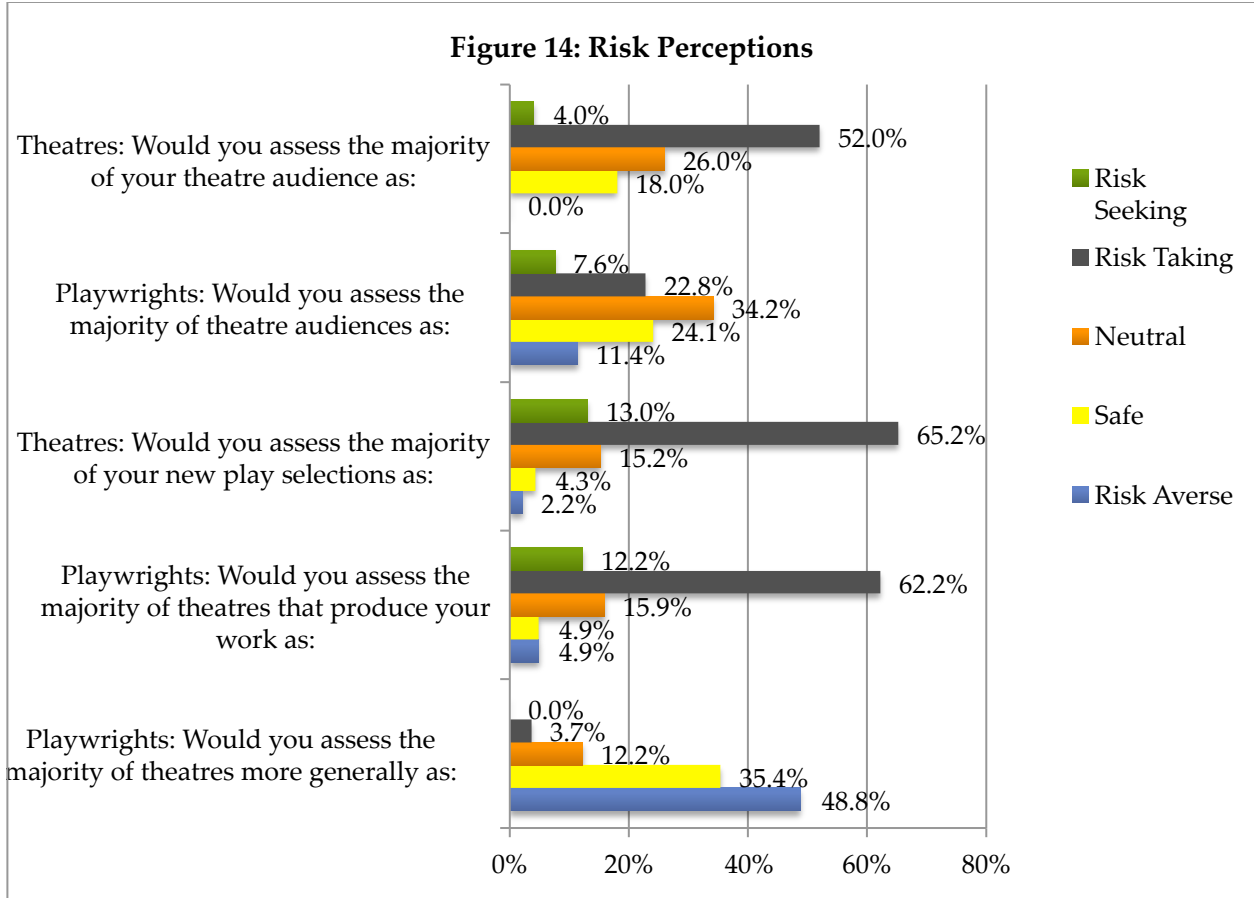
Risk

The following set of questions sought to explore whether theatre leaders and playwrights view the majority of theatres and their audiences as “risk averse,” “safe,” “neutral,” “risk taking,” or “risk seeking” (see Figure 14). Theatre leaders were asked about the risk propensity of the majority of their own audiences as well as the majority of their new play selection. Playwrights were asked about the risk propensity of the majority of theatre audiences, theatres that produce their work, and theatres more generally.

Theatre leaders, on whole, view their new play selections as more “risk-taking” and “risk-seeking” than they view the majority of their theatre audiences. 78.2% of theatre respondents believed one of these two characterizations best described the majority of their new play selections, while 56.0% of them described their audiences as such. At the same time, theatre leaders view the majority of their audiences as significantly more risk-taking and risk-seeking than playwrights perceive them to be. A full 11.4% of playwrights view the majority of theatre audiences as risk averse whereas no theatre leader characterized their audience as such.

A combined 78.2% of theatres assessed the majority of their new play selections as either “risk taking” or “risk seeking,” and 74.4% of playwrights described the theatres that produced their work as either “risk taking” or “risk seeking.” However, playwrights tend to perceive that theatres more generally are “risk averse” (48.8%) or “safe” (35.4%).

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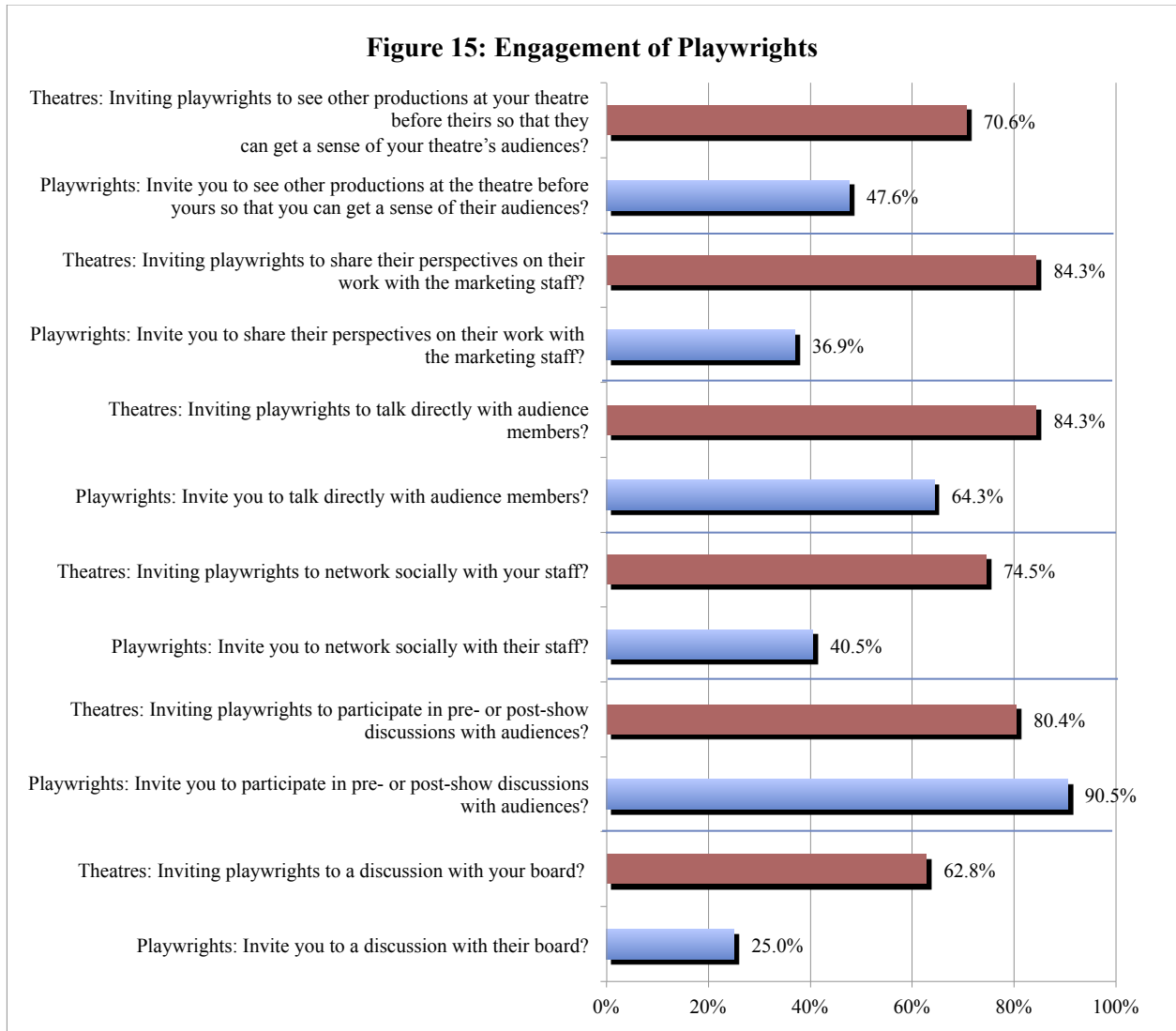


Engagement of Playwrights

An additional important component to the survey was exploring the ways in which theatres most frequently engage playwrights to premiere their plays (see Figure 15). The general question for the theatre respondents was, “When you work with playwrights to premiere their plays, do you engage them in any of the following activities (please check all that apply)?” and the general question for the playwright respondents was, “When you work with theatres that premiere your plays, do they typically engage you in any of the following activities (check all that apply)?” The options (as worded on the theatre surveys) included:

- Inviting playwrights to participate in pre- or post-show discussions with audiences
- Inviting playwrights to see other productions at your theatre before theirs so that they can get a sense of your theatre’s audiences
- Inviting playwrights to share their perspectives on their work with the marketing staff
- Inviting playwrights to talk directly with audience members
- Inviting playwrights to network socially with your staff
- Inviting playwrights to a discussion with your board

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With only one exception, for every activity surveyed, the percentage of theatres responding that they included playwrights in that activity was larger than the percentage of playwrights responding that they had been engaged in those activities. Some of the discrepancies were indeed quite large. For example, 84.3% of theatres replied that they regularly invite playwrights to share their perspectives on their work with the marketing staff, while only 36.9% of playwrights said they typically had been engaged in such activities. 62.8% of theatres said they had invited playwrights to a discussion with the theatres' respective boards, but only one-quarter (25.0%) of playwrights said that was a typical occurrence. And, 74.5% of theatre leaders said they had invited playwrights to network socially with their staff, while only 40.5% of playwrights listed it. The only exception was "inviting playwrights to participate in pre- or post-show discussions with audiences:" 80.4% of theatres said that they engaged playwrights in this way, while 90.5% of playwrights responded that they had been engaged in this way. Because of the nature of the study—the theatres have not necessarily worked with the same playwrights that were surveyed, and vice versa—it is hard to say the extent of the perception gap.

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Reasons for Not Producing New Work

The theatre companies were asked, “Is there a customary reason that playwrights are given when your theatre has decided not to produce their work?” Then, if they answered “yes,” they were asked to pick the primary reason, or list their own. The choices they were given were:

- Cast size
- Cast composition
- Too expensive
- Don't have the right space for it
- Expectations about audience reception and interest
- Just didn't love it

Only 14 theatre leaders said that there was a customary reason. A couple of the respondents who said there was not a customary reason, still picked one of the options in the follow-up question. Of the 14 respondents, over half (53.3%) said plays were customarily not chosen because the theatres “just didn’t love it” and 26.7% said it was due to “expectations about audience reception and interest.” Two of the fifteen said it was typically due to cast size, while one said they “don’t have the right space for it.” Three of the write-in comments mentioned that the customary reason involved a lack of consistency between the submitted plays and the theatre’s mission. Another three said that the submitted plays frequently did not match the requirements of the theatre. One of these wrote that they reason typically involved “turning down unsolicited scripts under the blanket policy that we don't accept them. Not enough staffing to support it, and not enough interest in scripts we don't know to form a script reading group for recommendation.”

Writing for an Audience

The final questions for the playwrights sought to gain insight into whether they write plays with a specific audience in mind. To that, 30.1% said yes. Those that said yes were then asked, “If you write plays with a specific audience in mind, do you specifically target theatres that already attract that audience?” Of the twenty-five respondents, 68.0% said that they did. Thus, only 20.5% of theatre respondents said that they target theatres with plays written for specific audiences (68.0% of 30.1%).

