Research Summary - Applying Neuroscience and Psychology frameworks to Theatre Audiences.

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In recent years there has been increasing focus on Theatre (and arts) audiences, with a focus on Diversity and Inclusion.

As important as it is to understand demographic differences in Theatre attendance, this study set out with the aim of understanding audiences at a much deeper level, using theoretical frameworks from Neuroscience.

There were three key elements to this research

- A large-scale public survey (3,500 respondents), nationally representative and gathering data not only on cultural attendance but also on values, beliefs and desires
- Use of neuroscience theories to understand Theatre in the context of a range of other cultural activities - is Theatre ‘special’ to audiences and how does Theatre fit into their lives?
- Use of theory to question the future direction of Theatre - what do audiences truly want from theatre, and therefore what does an inclusive future look like?

There were also three overarching questions that it was hoped the study could contribute to:

- Race and class are important paradigms to study Theatre audiences, but can we use neuroscience to look at audience motivation across demographic barriers?
- What role does Creativity play in attracting audiences and delivering a motivation to them?
- In what ways can use of scientific frameworks be applied to the arts?

Findings

The survey was successfully deployed and has become a rich dataset on Theatre audiences. Not just due to its large scale, but also the breadth of insight generated.

Applying neuroscience frameworks to this dataset, we are now able to distinguish the specific ways in which audiences view theatre, in comparison to other artforms and leisure pursuits. There are two benefits for which Theatre is particularly strong compared to other activities: Allowing people an escape from the reality of everyday life, and allowing audiences to experience creativity.

Most audiences also consider a key benefit of Theatre to be its social aspect – it’s a way for them to spend time with friends.

The ‘motivation profile’ for Theatre reveals that in audience motivation terms it is closer to live music than it is to cinema, and just as close to attending a live sporting event as it is to reading a book. Audiences clearly value and respond to Theatre as a live medium. ‘Liveness’ means that Theatre is harder to access than film or TV, and this is reflected in the data – audiences from Low-income households attend less Theatre than richer people, but over 50% of them would like to attend Theatre more often.

But while the liveness of theatre may make it harder to access than TV or books, it also contributes significantly to its appeal. This study supports the theory that watching live actors does involve a
shift in consciousness, which would involve, in neuroscience terms, increased ‘arousal’ and attention.

Diversity of audiences

This study has found new ways to consider Diversity of audiences. For some audiences, including significantly high proportions of graduates and non-white audiences, Theatre is an artform that allows them to learn new things. For other audiences, with a greater representation of non-graduates, Theatre is more of an ‘escape’, a way of building friendships, and delivering entertainment where they know what to expect.

Theatre also helps audiences in terms of ‘Mood Management’. The ability of theatre to raise morale, release tension and provide an emotional release is a major part of what makes it attractive, and, based on this study, this is the most essential motivation to appeal to in order to increase ticket sales.

The study therefore has revealed a new segmented way to look at Theatre from an audience perspective, with three ‘aspects’ of Theatre that have benefit to audiences

- Non-hedonic competence – Theatre which helps build a more nuanced view of the world, builds perspective and helps audiences know themselves
- Extrinsic Hedonic – Theatre which is an escape, a social experience and delivers what audiences expect
- Mood management – the ability of all kinds of Theatre to raise morale and provide emotional release

This new framework gives a perspective on how Theatre can deliver the most benefits, for the widest range of audiences.

Overarching findings

This study did not set out to, nor did it achieve, a way to supplant talking about race, class, access or other frameworks for discussing inclusion. However it did find a way to talk about audience needs that does not talk down to or patronise audiences. Audiences have the autonomy to assess and select different leisure pursuits. If Theatre can deliver the audience benefits identified in this report, then both audiences and Theatre will benefit. By using this framework, theatre-makers may find new ways to inform their programming and marketing strategies.

The study also verified the importance of creativity to audiences. For Theatre audiences the study suggests that creativity works in multiple ways. Theatre itself is seen as one of the best ways to experience creativity. Those who value theatre for its creativity are more likely to also value the ability of theatre to teach and increase competence, suggesting that theatrical creativity may be a non-hedonic, competence raising benefit. At the same time, Extrinsic Hedonic audiences were most likely to describe their standout theatrical experience as ‘creative’, suggesting that Creativity can have an even bigger impact on audiences who are looking to use theatre as an escape rather than a learning tool.

It seems very important to understand the importance of creativity for audiences in neurological terms, and this should be a fruitful area for future study.
Finally, a key aim for this study was to test the application of scientific theory to Theatre. In this case, the use of applied neuroscientific frameworks has simultaneously opened up a new perspective on Theatre audiences and also reinforced humanities-based views of audiences.

The salience of the results of this research – finding clear distinctions between audience motivations for different leisure activities, and finding non-demographic dependant ways of explaining differences in Theatre attendance - should encourage other researchers looking to find ways to bring Science into the field of Arts.