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Challenges of Cultural Industry Knowledge Exchange in Live Performance Audience Research

Abstract:

With live performance audience research frequently relying on cultural organisations to facilitate access to their audiences, this article addresses the issues involved in evidencing spectators' responses via discursive methodologies. Recalling a series of empirical projects conducted over the past ten years with a range of theatre practitioners, it examines the conflicts involved in carrying out scholarly studies of audience reception against cultural organisations' pressures to produce their own ongoing audience evaluations. Examining key concerns about audience research raised by creative practitioners in varying theatrical contexts, from site-specific to building-based work, it addresses the difficulties of understanding live performance reception and aesthetic experience via impact frameworks. It begins by situating these three operations in the context of Knowledge Exchange (KE) between academics within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and those in the creative industry sector.

Keywords: audience research, cultural value, knowledge exchange, impact, theatre

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Challenges of Cultural Industry Knowledge Exchange in Live Performance Audience Research

I begin with a memory. *I am lying flat on my stomach on a beach in Barmouth, cowering outside a circle of windbreakers. I am scribbling hastily in my notepad, trying to recall the audience observations I memorised since my last secret checkpoint. Inside the circle the audience sits on lilos, only a flimsy piece of plastic separating my face from their behinds. Meanwhile, a performer in an old-fashioned bathing suit prances sexily around the outside of the windbreakers. He almost treads on me. I am in his way. I am trying very hard to remain unobtrusive so the audience will not see me. I have been told to keep my involvement here on the down-low: to most participants, at this moment I am just a steward, one of a team of volunteers helping to marshal their group from place to place during this three-hour promenade performance.*

I have transgressed before. Prioritising my research has seen me taken aside and scolded, even though this is precisely what I am here for: to observe audience behaviour, snatching moments to document their reactions as we walk together around town. Over the months of my PhD research, though, it has been made increasingly clear that my access to the producers' audience is dependent on inconspicuousness. Then suddenly, lying on the beach, a gust of wind rips a fistful of pages out of my notepad and blows them away. I lie on my front, sand in my eyes, torn between breaking rank and dashing after them and returning to inevitable wrath, or letting my hard-won observations disappear into the sea.

(personal field notes, National Theatre Wales: *For Mountain, Sand & Sea*, 1 July 2010)

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Introduction

This article performs three tasks. First, with live performance audience research frequently relying on cultural organisations to facilitate access to their audiences, it addresses the issues involved in evidencing spectators' responses via discursive methodologies. Recalling a series

of empirical projects conducted over the past ten years with a range of industry connections, it examines the conflicts involved in carrying out scholarly studies of audience reception against the pressures on cultural organisations to produce their own ongoing evaluations of engagement and impact. Second, it examines key concerns about audience research raised by creative practitioners in varying theatrical contexts, from site-specific to building-based work, with a view to addressing the particularities of the *live performance* experience. As a practitioner once told me (with more than a hint of irritation): "theatre isn't film": this is an experience that is frequently perceived as fundamentally distinct from other forms of cultural engagement - such as the experience of visiting a museum, or watching a television programme - and therefore requiring unique considerations. Third, extending Moreton's query here in *Cultural Trends* about 'what happens when the HEI and creative sectors are brought together under the auspices of knowledge exchange?' (2016, p. 101), this paper asks what kinds of knowledge are produced via an *academic* study of live performance engagement that is distinct from theatres' *own, ongoing* evaluations of visitors' motivations and engagements, and to what extent these different epistemes can in fact be considered a form of 'exchange'. It begins by situating these three operations in the context of Knowledge Exchange (KE) between academics within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and those in the business and government sectors.

Knowledge exchange has been examined in depth in a range of papers both within the pages of this journal (Kelly et al, 2015; Stainforth et al., 2015; Moreton, 2018) and beyond (Williamson et al., 2011; Schlesinger, 2013; Hauge et al., 2018). KE is part of the 'triple helix' of university-industry-government relations (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000), in which alongside traditional functions of teaching and research universities are now expected to fulfil a new 'third mission': to strengthen dialogue with stakeholders outside academia and thereby 'fulfil their obligation towards being a socially accountable institution' (Jongbloed et al., 2008). While knowledge exchange has been increasingly institutionalised within HEI over the past thirty years (Kitagawa et al., 2013, p. 1), it was The Wilson Review, commissioned by the UK government in 2012, that is considered responsible in this country for officially and comprehensively solidifying business-university engagement as a central policy agenda, working toward the objective of 'making the UK the best place in the world for industry-university collaboration' (2012: 14). Dovey et al. (2016) situate these developments within an encompassing 'impact agenda': a term which in 2014 was given a twenty-percent weighting in the UK's six-yearly assessment of research quality, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and which refers to 'a set of evaluative practices […] to

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demonstrate that academic research outputs can have a tangible or measurable effect on stakeholders outside of the academy' (2016: 87).

Gilmore and Comunian (2016) suggest that arts and humanities disciplines initially approached knowledge exchange much more 'slowly and reluctantly' than STEM fields, with scientific and technological industries having long considered HEIs to be 'central to local knowledge economies because they engage actively in research exploitation through technology transfer, patenting and spin-offs' (p. 2). However, as the advent of austerity measures in the late 2000s saw funding cuts hitting the cultural sector in earnest, arts institutions and other creative organisations began to recognise the value of 'new "partnership" developments which might open up new resources and efficiencies for both sectors' (ibid., p. 3). At the same time humanities scholars have themselves been actively encouraged to seek out industry relationships, spurred on by their own institutions' demands to produce high-quality REF Impact Case Studies as well as through the development of dedicated funding streams. Dovey et al. (2016) trace a particular upswell of eagerness to 2011, when the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) made available a total of £19.2 million to fund four 'Knowledge Exchange Hubs for the Creative Economy' at full economic cost. The aim was to strengthen collaborations between universities and the creative sector, and to produce combined knowledge that would benefit both spheres.

Looking 'behind the attractions of porosity, and the legitimate social justice demands on the expansion of access' (McCowan, 2018, p. 280), the following section asks how academic concerns raised about knowledge exchange relate specifically to audience research in the live and performing arts? Within cultural industry contexts, knowledge exchange efforts have frequently seen scholarly attention paid to the processes and networks of creative *production*: for example, in the case of the Bristol-based REACT (Research and Enterprise for Arts and Creative Technologies), one of four AHRC's hubs, which has produced important knowledge about the digital-cultural ecology (Dovey et al., 2016). The particular difficulty audience researchers face is their focus specifically on producing knowledge about *reception*. I argue that this places audience scholars in a particularly precarious position, tasked with doing three things at once:

i. evidencing the value-production of cultural partners, recompensing them for time and access via the collation of positive feedback (e.g. for use in funding reports);
ii. producing formative assessments of audiences' engagements, motivations, and resistances, in the hope of leading to changes in institutional practice and ensuring the impact of research;

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iii. dodging critiques of instrumentalism within our own disciplines by demonstrating the epistemological ramifications of going beyond 'impact' to 'cultural value', producing internationally-excellent academic outputs that deeply interrogate audiences' sense-making processes (Sedgman 2017).

The key challenge is balancing the maintenance of long-term partnerships with industry organisations, for whom any potential audience negativity necessarily presents a risk, with the need to produce rigorous scholarly knowledge that draws out the complexities of divergent aesthetic response.

Knowledge Exchange, Cultural Value, and the Impact Agenda

At the same time as signalling desire by a new generation of twenty-first-century academics to reach out past academia's borders and share expertise in genuinely collaborative ways, any analysis of knowledge exchange must also acknowledge the anxieties produced around what 'counts' as valuable and how that value is assessed (Pain et al., 2011). In their study of academics' emotional responses Chubb et al. find that in an HEI culture whereby '[m]uch of the public debate concerning the reception of the impact agenda is characterised by academic resistance', it is humanities scholars in particular who have 'feared having to justify the *value* of their work' (2017, p. 562). I suggest that this acute disciplinary resistance to the need to 'prove or show' value in fields such as music or theatre can be linked to the contemporaneous imposition of 'impact' as an evaluative framework on both the arts *experience* and arts *scholarship*.

It is clear that in its institutionalised form knowledge exchange is part of a broader shift towards 'New Public Management' that grew out of the 1980s and 1990s, inspired by the private sector and impelled on both higher education and the cultural sectors by neoliberal governance, which has 'sought to modernise public sector managerial techniques […] through setting targets, monitoring outputs, and auditing performance' (Crossik et al., 2016, p. 16).[1] The impact agenda as a whole must therefore be understood as an eschewal both of the arts and of knowledge 'for their own sake', in favour of reducing aesthetic experience and

[1] Following Leslie Oakes et al. (1998) we might consider this a Bourdieusian form of symbolic violence, excluding some knowledges and ways of valuing an organisation in favour of others.

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research activities to an investment designed to produce quantifiable social, cultural, and/or economic benefits (Chubb et al., 2017).

As the provision of arts funding gradually became reliant on proof of beneficial change, cultural institutions were increasingly placed under pressure to produce immediate and unambiguous indices of success. Whether via box office analyses, audience segmentation, or arts impact evaluations, such internally-driven research is often necessarily limited in scope - for example, designed to understand audiences' motivations for attendance, or to measure positive increases in unquantifiable phenomena like wellbeing or community cohesion - and as such has been criticised for 'embracing selection criteria, techniques and a hierarchy of evidence which privileged certain types of inquiry over others' (Crossik et al., 2016, p. 17). Where studies *have* used qualitative methodologies to 'engage with felt experience and study value as attributed from the first-person perspective' (2016, p. 21), their emergence out of an 'advocacy agenda' has led to a 'blurring [of] the boundaries between advocacy and research' (Belfiore et al., 2008, p. 7). Frequently 'poorly conceived and implemented', such studies have been

> biased towards the delivery of a positive result and culturally specific ideological ends. The major reason given for such a bias is that evaluations are initiated and often conducted by agencies with a vested interest in a successful outcome, whether that be the funding agency or the organisations funded to run the arts programs. (Johanson and Glow, 2015, p. 225)

Hence the intervention made in 2014 by the AHRC's 'Cultural Value Project', whose support of seventy empirical projects was designed 'to broaden the scope of the discussion' beyond traditional 'instrinsic' vs. 'instrumental' binaries, 'to cast the net wider' and consider as broad a range of amateur and professional cultural practice as possible, and 'to reposition first-hand, individual experience of arts and culture at the heart of enquiry into cultural value'. This was part of a broader shift away from asking what culture does to society, and towards a consideration of 'the way people experience culture' (Crossik et al., 2016, p. 7): a trend that has itself been foreshadowed by audience research. For instance, scholars such as John Tulloch (2000), Stephanie Pitts (2000), Rebecca Scollen (2008), Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow and Katya Johanson (2010), Matthew Reason (2010b), Caroline Heim (2012), and Ben Walmsley (2013) have been particularly active in leading the 2000s/10s charge towards richer understandings of arts audience experiences, building in turn on the foundational work of researchers such as Frank Coppieters (1981), Willmar Sauter (1986), and Henri

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Schoenmakers (1990). Along with a host of new studies by emerging scholars,[2] from a performance studies perspective these authors have gone some way to mitigating Helen Freshwater's 2009 concern that theatre scholars have *in general* felt 'more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre's unique influence and impact upon audiences than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims', preferring in the main 'to draw on their own responses or the opinions of reviewers' in lieu of 'asking "ordinary" audience members – with no professional stake in the theatre – what they make of a performance' (2009, p. 3-4).

And yet from the vantage point of an early-career theatre audience researcher, this has at times felt like an uphill battle. See for example the reticence of John E. McGrath - then-Artistic Director of National Theatre Wales - who in 2016 recalled his trepidation six years previously when deciding whether to facilitate my PhD research into audiences' responses to their very first season of work:

> I have to admit that I was initially sceptical of this project. When Kirsty Sedgman first approached National Theatre Wales about her plan to engage with and analyse our launch year of activity – the Theatre Map of Wales – it seemed that she was planning on using potentially the worst possible combination of market research and cultural theorising. While both are legitimate activities in their own right, the kind of calibrated responses to artistic activity that the 'post-show questionnaire' has come to emblematize – such as rating things on a scale of poor to excellent – is more an indicator of 'customer satisfaction' than artistic experience; whereas the conclusions of the cultural theorist are sometimes driven as much by the academic viewpoint of the writer as by the art work itself.
>
> By and large, each person coming to see a production will get to see it only once: they will be in that unique and fragile imagined world for just a few hours. The introduction of an external element – the questionnaire – at the delicate moment of the performance's conclusion could feel like a bucket of judgemental cold water thrown on a flickering creative fire. Moreover, while I find cultural theory invigorating and challenging, a theorising that made claims to truth based on such audience surveys could, I felt, be hiding its subjectivity behind a pretence of having somehow got inside the audience's heads.
>
> And yet I agreed wholeheartedly with her basic premise: audiences matter, they are our reason for being there, we should get to know them better. Perhaps her techniques would be more productive than I could predict. I think in the end I gave the go ahead for Kirsty's research on the basis that she 'made herself useful and didn't get in the way' (McGrath, 2016, p. *vii*)

McGrath's words are worth quoting in full because of their exemplary demonstration of 'knowledge resistance' in action (Williamson et al., 2011). In their research into the music

[2] See Sedgman 2018 for a contemporary survey of the emergent field of theatre audience research.

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industry, these academics found that 'a premium is put on what one might call experiential knowledge – on the unsystematized accumulation of anecdote and example, on instinct and gut feelings, on the value of 'good ears' and intuition', which means that 'organized knowledge' such as market research strategies have at the same time been perceived by artists as simultaneously commercially use*ful* and epistemologically use*less* (ibid, 460). McGrath's concerns about separating 'artistic experience' from 'customer satisfaction' - at this point based solely on the knowledge that I was planning to combine 'quali-quant' questionnaires (Barker and Mathijs 2008) with semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations - can be firmly rooted in broader resistance to the neoliberal impact agenda. Suspicions about the increased metricisation of value exemplified, for example, by the Arts Council's recent 'Culture Counts' toolkit (Phiddian et al. 2017), has led many cultural scholars and practitioners to dismiss academic audience research as a whole - and the post-show questionnaire particularly - for seeming 'too close to the "market research" or ratings games that are at the heart of commercial ventures within consumer-based capitalism' (Reinelt 2014, p. 338).[3] For empirical researchers, then, impact has always been a double-edged sword.

To understand this tension further it is worth considering the phenomenological affect of the impact agenda on those who need to navigate it. Alongside attracting emotional associations like 'scary', 'threat', 'nervousness', and 'worry', HEI's third mission has also presented new opportunities for those willing and able to seize them (Chubb et al. 2017, p. 561). This has led to an emergent 'knowledge capitalism' (Olssen et al., 2005), whereby with knowledge increasingly reconfigured as a globalised economic good, universities in the west can be seen to have 'beg[u]n in earnest to privatize the means of knowledge production' (ibid, p. 339). The 'ivory tower' scholar has thus been encouraged to reinvent herself in the form of an 'entrepreneurial academic' (Etzkowitz, Webster, et al. 2000): one who is driven to seek out new industry relationships not solely through a genuine spirit of collegiality, but in an effort to survive an increasingly precarious and competitive market (Allmer 2018).

This is the marketplace into which I emerged, graduating with my PhD in 2014 from the University of Aberystwyth, UK, and immediately being made redundant from my zero-hours teaching post at the same university - with both events occurring the month before my first baby was born. For the next two years I balanced full-time childcare responsibilities with

[3] There is not the space in this paper to launch a full-scale defence of the epistemological value of the 'quali-quant' post-show questionnaire format, as differentiated from feedback forms designed for the purpose of impact evaluation. For those interested, a detailed reflection on the kinds of broad, patternable, scholarly knowledge this method can produce is provided in Sedgman 2016.

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writing scholarly publications with conducting arts impact evaluation projects, working in a consultancy capacity for creative industry organisations around the UK. By mid-2016 I had worked on a range of projects, augmenting my externally-funded National Theatre Wales research with a study of spectators' understandings of authenticity in a performed-poetry theatre performance for Bloodaxe Books and Midland Creative Projects, an analysis for Arts Council Wales (2016) of the value of artists-in-schools residencies to primary-age children, an evaluation of Oriel Wrecsam's (2016) community-engaged arts projects, a study of visitors' engagements with the Machynlleth Comedy Festival, and an evaluation of Lincoln Council and Cultural Solutions UK's participatory heritage festival for the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta. At the same time I was applying for academic lectureships and postdoctoral positions in a marketplace that has increasingly fetishised competition (Naidoo 2016). It was therefore a strategic decision to use these 'alt-ac' experiences to position myself to HEIs as an impact-centred researcher, already developing successful triple-helix relationships and building a reputation for knowledge exchange.

Nonetheless, articulating the focus of my work in impact terms required the simultaneous management of collegial suspicions about the *epistemological* value of audience research. As McGrath's quotation indicates, skepticism toward the methods and approaches of audience studies can at least partly be attributed to fatigue with 'the kind of calibrated responses to artistic activity' (2016, *vii*) expected of impact evaluations. Frequently dismissed by both cultural practitioners and arts scholars for producing 'insufficiently important or slightly obvious findings' (Reinelt 2014, 339), such methodologies are at best seen as useful arts management tools for revealing demographics and motivations and facilitating more targeted marketing efforts, yet considered fundamentally unable to produce meaningful knowledge about aesthetic experience. McGrath's concerns also encompass the lingering assumption that audience researchers may in their arrogance feel able to make claims of objectivity, thereby denying the subjective processes involved in *capturing* and *analysing* discursive indicators of reception[4], along with the fear that the very act of taking

[4] These concerns have presented an especially delicate challenge within my own research, as the methods and approaches I use were developed in a very different sphere: namely, to explore spectatorship in cinema and television. The 'Audience Studies' field can be traced back as early as 1930s mass media research, and has spent the almost-century since staking out a niche yet fertile corner of cultural studies. A self-admittedly interdisciplinary and multifaceted form of media and communications research, Audience Studies has nonetheless been united by a common question: how do audiences make use of and find meaning in cultural texts? Forays into other methodologies aside, since the 'ethnographic turn' of the 1980s, media scholars involved in the 'New Audience Research' tradition have collectively advanced a qualitative approach to audience reception. Contrary to alternative approaches (such as neuroaesthetic cognitive science, or quantitative box office analysis), which all come with their own distinct considerations, my work follows other New

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part in post-show research will necessarily douse the powerful flames of aesthetic response - whereas, as numerous studies have shown, this process can often actually succeed in stoking them (see e.g. Scollen, 2007; Heim, 2012; Lindelof and Hansen 2015).

One of the most interesting aspects of conducting theatre audience research has been the disjunction between the *deficit* viewpoints of certain practitioners, who seem to assume that any call for audiences to articulate their reactions risks ruining the aesthetic experience itself,[5] and the willingness of the eager-to-participate audience member, who often welcomes discursive methods for their *additive* properties: the opportunity to reflect on the performance, to rate it and critique it, and to analyse its productive potentials - whether in the limiting discursive boxes of the quali-quantitative questionnaire or in the longer-form interview, focus group, or creative-participatory workshop. I have received postcards from respondents alongside their posted responses thanking me for giving them the opportunity to share their feelings, which they had been longing to articulate; another - in lieu of using an envelope - carefully folded their completed A4 sheet into quarters and then painstakingly stitched all around the edge in red thread. In fact, it is telling that for one performance I received questionnaires by post from a minimum of 21% of the total audience, despite being unable to collect them at the event itself. Here, two hundred people took the time to write (often lengthy and detailed) answers, add my address and a stamp, and carry their thoughts to the post box. And this is just for feedback forms! My present externally-funded British Academy research project, a multi-method examination of how audiences' engagements with Bristol Old Vic have evolved through time, has to date captured more than 2,000 post-show questionnaire responses from five separate productions: out of the 1,959 surveys ready for analysis, 911 (46%) chose to give me their contact details to be part of a follow-up interview. Interviewees frequently articulate frustrations with their everyday inability to share reactions with someone truly willing to take their feelings seriously: either because they tend to go alone, or because they constantly find their responses 'disconfirmed' by others (Sedgman 2016, p. 87). One such respondent recently told me that she was 'really glad to talk to someone about [a performance event]. The attitude is often "we liked it, you're wrong". Well that's not fair. I want to say what I want to say'. If, as all this suggests, people very often

Audience Researchers in investigating the complex relationship between audience *experience* and audience *talk* (Sedgman, forthcoming).

[5] For a compelling description of theatre-makers' worries about the power of language to destroy what it seeks to describe see Reason, who argues that 'rather than thinking that research that takes place after the event allows us access to only a pale, wasted and distorted reflection of a "true" experience, perhaps we should be thinking of post-performance reception processes as a connected but different experience in its own right (2010a, 26).

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want to speak in much more nuanced terms than practitioners may anticipate about all the ‘cognitive’, ‘sensuous’, ‘aesthetic’, ‘emotional’, and ‘imaginative’ dimensions (Barker and Mathijs 2008) involved in acts of audiencing - and if this work has the potential to produce important knowledge about ‘the memorial afterlives of audience experiences’, as Matthew Reason (2010a) so evocatively claims - then ‘what is the harm in listening?’ (Sedgman, 2016, 25).

The following section goes some way to answering this question through considering the perceived risks posed to theatre by academic research, alongside the difficulties for an audience researcher of staying out of the audience’s way.

What is the Harm in Listening?

First, it is worth remembering that the people most eager to participate are likely to be those experiencing either highly positive reactions or extreme disappointment. Katya Johnson and Hilary Glow (2015) have written persuasively about the ‘virtuous circle’, with researcher-respondent interactions exacerbating extant biases toward positive evaluations. Empirical studies often unwittingly encourage respondents to construct the answers they think a researcher wants to hear, or otherwise to ‘reiterate customary strategies’ of response (Hermes, 2009, p. 119). It is for these reasons that ‘audiences’ answers in interviews, their focus group discussions, their scribbled reflections on post-show survey forms […] [must not be studied as] verifiable slices of experience’, but rather as social interactions in and of themselves, examined for what they can tell us about how the meaning-making process operates within the discursive constraints and norms of that particular reflective context (Sedgman, forthcoming). In other words, the object of study is not the evaluative rating itself, but the systems of criteria used to come to those value judgements: a discursive process underpinned by all the underlying subject positions and systems of knowledge by which cultural texts and practices are made meaningful in varying ways to different people.

Second, as McGrath’s description of empirical methodologies - as ‘a bucket of judgemental cold water thrown on a flickering creative fire’ (2016, p. *vii*) - suggests, as an ineffable artform live performance is subject to especial concerns. Not only are audience research methodologies often considered unable to capture meaningful knowledge about spectators’ aesthetic experiences; on a practical level this work could actually be responsible

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for destroying the aesthetic experience itself (Sedgman 2016, p. 24). In the anecdote that opened this paper I described a moment during the National Theatre Wales production *For Mountain, Sand & Sea* (Marc Rees: Barmouth, June/July 2010), a three-hour promenade 'theatrical excursion' of a small mid-Wales seaside town drawing inspiration from the community's history, which as McGrath points out I was able to use as a case-study on the proviso I 'made myself useful' and stayed out of the way. This meant negotiating my role as researcher around acting as a volunteer steward for both this show and *The Persians* (Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes: Sennybridge Military Range, August 2010), a new translation of Aeschylus' tragedy by Kaite O'Reilly, performed on a British military range high up in the Brecon Beacons.[6]

As the opening anecdote indicates, my primary directive was this: under no circumstances must I distract the audience from the performance experience.[7] This made observation work very difficult, as in order to remain inconspicuous I was unable to take notes when visible. I discovered I was able to memorise around three observations at a time, and so established a series of checkpoints where I could stealthily jot them down: one on the hill during the song of Auguste Guyard, the exiled Frenchman, if I turned my back and wrote behind my bag; one sprawled behind windbreakers on the beach; one perched on the toilet in a nightclub; one waiting outside the Sailors' Institute (volunteers were not permitted inside); one during the blind harpist's song, sitting as far away as possible; and the last while spectators were on the bridge performing the 'orchestra of whirling instruments'. For the same reason, for neither production was I permitted to hand out my questionnaires prior to the performance, with each producing team separately (and understandably) rationalising that walking into the event clutching pieces of paper would i) prefigure expectations unhelpfully and ii) prove irritating.

Whilst in many ways unsurprising, this second point reveals one of the major lessons about conducting research into site-specific performances in particular, with the opening moments of both shows - stepping into the village hall for *FMSAS*, or onto the coaches in the case of *The Persians* - designed to act as a transitional device drawing participants into an

[6] This is by no means unusual: ethnographers working as 'participant-observers/observer-participants' are frequently required to navigate considerable difficulties securing and retaining organisational access. As Brian Moeran explains, '[e]ven when this has been achieved, and as a researcher you have gotten one foot in the corporate door, the kind of access you are permitted may well prove problematic' (2009, 140). See Sedgman 2016 for a detailed examination of the epistemological implications of playing the simultaneous role of steward and academic in this case-study.

[7] In Sedgman 2018 I analyse the historical campaigns to remove disruptions from all forms of aesthetic experiences, situating e.g. Fried's 'intimacy of observation' and Wagner's 'new listening' within the imagined societal benefits of focused audience attention and the concept of 'flow' (p. 23-42).

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immersive theatrical world. More surprisingly, I was also unable to disseminate questionnaires at my preferred locations afterward: for example, in Barmouth I hoped to deliver these right after the curtain call on the bridge, anticipating a funnelling effect where the audience moved through a narrow gap to reach the road. I was told this would not be possible for health and safety reasons, with producers keen to avoid distracting audiences before they crossed the busy road, and so agreed to give out questionnaires in Memorial Park instead (personal communication, June 24, 2011). However, once the show began it turned out that on leaving the bridge audience members were handed a free newspaper with further detail on the local stories referenced, indicating that actually producers' real concern was distracting audience members from their receipt of the *programme*, which - like the opening transitional moments - was seen as an intrinsic part of the experience. Similarly, for *The Persians* I was required to give out questionnaires as audiences climbed back on the coaches, ready to be transported down the mountain after the play's end. Enabling audiences to complete my surveys on the ride home would likely have produced a high completion rate, as by this point there was nothing to see outside the window aside from darkness and the occasional military flare. However, Mike Pearson similarly emphasised that the journeys were part of the experience, and so I was able only to hand out questionnaires frantically as audiences departed from the coaches.

It is possible to draw out broader implications for the pragmatics of performing research under these conditions. At stake in all this is the nature of performance as a live experience as understood by its producers, taking power from the co-presence of performer and audience sharing a particular space. Especially in site-specific and located productions, researchers must account for the importance placed by practitioners on ensuring that everything contained within that event works *for* the experience and not against it. See also the concerns of the organisers of an outdoor comedy event that I might damage the 'easy' atmosphere they had worked so hard to create; a worry which finds echoes by Hawkins et al.'s 2013 finding that 'vibes' play a significant role in festivals' success. Whether in a located event or in a theatre foyer, it is important not to underestimate the potential for practitioner unease generated by the imagined awkwardness of that initial approach: the dreaded image of the researcher who, walking around with her clipboard, dictaphone, or notebook, casts an imagined shadow over the performance experience. Yes, it is fair to acknowledge that, for many, being approached during or immediately after a performance to reflect on an experience that still needs time to settle may be offputting or unhelpfully reductive (which is why it is essential to give audiences the option of taking research

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information away); but as the above indicates, for many spectators academic research projects can also offer a welcome opportunity to feel genuinely heard.

Finally, it is worth noting that my official access to National Theatre Wales' audiences was curtailed at the point when their own consultant-led impact evaluations began. I was advised that for their second season I would not be given support to attend performances or recruit respondents, and was asked to shut my online survey down: despite being funded and managed independently of their organisation, it contained images of their show and was therefore considered in some respects 'branded' to them. While I could potentially have resisted this request, the very limited reach of live performance makes it extremely difficult to capture a meaningful response rate[8] without some organisational agreement of access. To put it differently: while it may be possible without any institutional support to get hold post-performance of spectators who viewed a particular production by a company like National Theatre Wales or Bristol Old Vic, this endeavour is likely to reach a much more limited spread of people than a project which facilitates your presence on site, or which agrees to send out recruitment notices to audiences on your behalf. Now contrast this with the extensive data corpuses achieved by audience studies of high-profile media texts, such as movies or television programmes: for example, to the 25,000 questionnaire responses captured by researchers about *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (Barker et al., 2008), or to the 36,000 for their follow-up, The World Hobbit Project (Barker et al., 2016), figures achieved with no assistance from the films' producers or marketing teams at all. Comparatively, having permission to hand out questionnaires on site enabled my National Theatre Wales project to capture a relatively high percentage of the total audience - *For Mountain, Sand and Sea* was completed by just under 40% of all spectators - and yet the show's diminutive capacity meant my total corpus was actually very small: 196 completed questionnaires from a possible total of 500. Unless the event in question is a mega-musical or equally populist event, when it comes to live performance every single lost audience member really does add up.

At the same time, in an effort to maintain institutional support, academic researchers may find themselves having to work around a range of other data-capture efforts and fundraising appeals designed to reach out to audiences. For example, in the Bristol Old Vic project my post-show questionnaires and interview requests were initially distributed

[8] Of course, this is specifically an issue for research incorporating survey methods; big numbers are less important for purely qualitative projects, although here the lack of official access still places extra pressures on participant recruitment.

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alongside the theatre's own online survey form in order to meet the needs of their marketing team to capture consistent and continuous response data, whilst at the same time their £2.4m transformative Heritage Lottery Foundation grant mandated the engagement of a dedicated external consultancy firm to evidence the impact of redeveloping this very old building - with its brand new foyer - as a visitor destination. Taken in tandem with the feedback slips collected by the theatre's Engagement and Heritage departments after specific participation activities, as well as the traditional "tell us what you thought of the show!" postcard wall, the lesson learned here is that i) theatres are constantly in dialogue with their audiences; ii) any external study that seeks to do likewise risks getting in the way; and iii) the risk of undermining institutional audience research efforts operates at both a practical and an epistemological level. It is this latter point to which the conclusion considers, returning in doing so to the concept of knowledge exchange.

The Risks and Rewards of Audience Research: A Conclusion

With the ongoing decline in centralised arts funding, cultural organisations are overwhelmingly overstretched. While an organisation might theoretically see the potential of academic research to produce useful knowledge about audiences, this hypothetical value can be relatively nebulous and far-off, with academic monographs and journal articles taking a notoriously long time to bear fruit. In the meantime, arts organisations need to produce immediate and unambiguous evidence of impact as part of their wider funding advocacy. What then are the implications for a field like audience research, whose *knowledge* value lies in its ability to deepen understandings of *cultural* value, yet whose potential to draw out nuanced information risks undermining the success narratives of already-imperilled institutions?

It has been this paper's contention that scholarly audience research in the live and performing arts has both benefited from the impact and knowledge exchange agenda and been caught in its crossfire. Indeed, it is notable that this framework has rooted itself so strongly in the HEI cultures of both the UK and Australia, with '[d]iscussions of impact appear[ing] first in Australia, before being taken up more forcefully in the UK, and finally returning to Australia'. While similar 'knowledge mobilisation policies' have appeared in other nations, such as the USA, Canada, and the Netherlands, 'Australia and the UK have

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been at the forefront of policies on research impact' (Chubb et al., 2017, p. 557). Is it any coincidence then that both countries contain clusters of excellence in liver performance audience research, with the international Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts (iNARPA), for example, managed between the Universities of Leeds (UK) and Deakin (Melbourne, Australia)? With both cultural practitioners and scholars increasingly forced to articulate the wider impacts of their work, this has led to an increased eagerness to reach out and form new knowledge exchange collaborations, alongside fresh anxieties about the competing epistemological demands of their varying spheres.

As my National Theatre Wales study concluded, allowing a researcher external to (and unfunded by) an organisation to capture and disseminate evidence of its value presents a very real risk. As I reflected after that project, 'with the increasing need to presuppose and then prove the social benefits of participation it's progressively more important that arts organisations be seen to actually achieve the things they set out to', resulting in a 'flattening' of audiences' responses into an official narrative of success (Sedgman, 2016, p. 162). This has led to a Catch-22, whereby if academics want to maintain long-term relationships with - often their own local - institutions, they have an obligation to ensure that any evidence of negative impact does not place creative organisations' public image and/or funding in jeopardy; yet they also have an obligation to scholarship - as well as to their respondents - to produce rigorous knowledge of nuanced and contradictory reception processes. As knowledge is 'not a neutral category', Williamson et al. explain, 'knowledge transfer is never going to be straightforward'. In the case of the triple helix, 'the "knowledge" concerned is processed according to quite different motivations' (2011, p. 461): in industry this is 'a means to an immediate end', in policy a justification for pre-made decisions (p. 470), while academia's role is to 'challenge, not confirm orthodoxies', retain 'an integrity that necessitates a willingness to tell the bad news as well as the good', and 'remain an important source of irritation' (ibid). This tension can potentially be applied in general to any academic-industry collaboration.

However, for those whose focus is on audiences of live performance, I contend that within these difficulties lurks a special opportunity. As evidenced by the 2017 inauguration of iNARPA and subsequent launch of the new Routledge Theatre and Performance book series in Audience Research - alongside this *Cultural Studies* special issue itself - the field is currently undergoing a process of consolidation. Gaining critical mass means a new ability to pattern our findings, layering our multiplicitous understandings of audience engagement, reception, perception, and experience, and together capturing a richer sense of the whole. As

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I have elsewhere argued: 'From critical analysis to 'big-data' quantitative surveys, and from arts marketing research to neuro-aesthetics, each approach is able to capture a particular kind of knowledge: each has its own strengths; each brings with it particular limitations' (Sedgman, 2017, p. 315). Whether exchanging knowledge with each other or with industry practitioners, and no matter which methodologies are used: the goal now is to acknowledge that our own methods will never be able to shed light on *all* the complexities of spectatorship, but that each approach has the potential to uncover a specific piece of the puzzle. This necessitates embracing the 'polyphonic' nature of audience research: not disregarding epistemological differences, but rather articulating those differences 'and appreciat[ing] the value of its distinctiveness in the production of knowledge' (Paquette and Redaelli, 2015, p. 112). The challenge now is to encourage our creative industry connections to embrace the polyphony of episteme culture (ibid), rather than perceiving the potential of audience research to expose unexpected or unfavourable impacts as a danger that must be quashed.

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