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Uncharted Territories in “Empirical” Audience Research

Kirsty Sedgman

When I was invited by the editors to contribute to this special issue, I was asked to address a key question. Which areas of spectatorship most pressingly need to be studied in our contemporary context? As an empirical audience researcher it would be extremely off-brand of me to give any other answer than empirical audience research. But using this term alone is to open up a can of worms—so before I go any further, I should probably explain what “empirical audience research” actually means.

Associated with scientific modes of study, the word “empirical”—at least when attached to “audiences”—does not necessarily promise adherence to any of the principles we often assume. I explain this in much more detail in my article “On Rigour in Theatre Audience Research” (Sedgman, forthcoming), but in short: empirical audience research does not (always) claim to produce objective, testable, or methodologically verifiable data about “actual” spectatorial response. Of course, sometimes it *does* claim to do these things—particularly in the fields of cognitive science and neuroaesthetics, which study what audiences’ brains and bodies are doing while they are in the middle of watching a performance. So too may a researcher conducting big-data surveys legitimately be able to claim objective knowledge—about the quantifiable stuff, at least: how many, where, who, when. But when it comes to the *why*? When it comes to understanding how audiences themselves understand their own expectations and experiences? To finding out more about how different people turn sensations into *sense*—to capturing, via discourse, something of that sense-making process, as individuals work to find and articulate meaning in their reactions to live performance? Well, then, the idea that it might be possible to produce scientifically verifiable data about “the audience experience” seems rather more ridiculous.

Here we are talking about the difference between reception *effects*—basically, what happens to people *during* an event—and “reception *result*” studies, which investigate what audiences do with their responses *after* an event has taken place (Schoenmaker, cited in Ginters 2010, 9). In reception result research, the word “empirical” is used under its original definition: to refer to claims based on observation and experience, rather than inferred by theory or logic alone. Thus, attaching the word “empirical” to “audiences” was designed to separate the academic discipline of “audience studies”—a distinct field of study, which has been part of the media and mass communications field since the 1930s—from “critical” spectatorship research (Ang 2006, 31). Whereas the latter has tended to speculate about spectatorship, producing overarching theories about how “the audience” as a whole respond to particular media texts, audience studies has instead been concerned with the ways spectators themselves negotiate their viewing practices in situated ways.

Here I want to stop again and say something very clearly. There is *nothing wrong with critical spectatorship research*. On the contrary: spectatorship scholarship should be valued for the careful,

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critical, self-reflexive insights it offers into the performance invitation. This work is unparalleled in its ability to help us think through the productive potentials and sociopolitical undertones of theatre. It helps us to understand the aesthetics and ethics of the audience invitation (White 2013); how the spectator is being positioned during a particular event, say; how they are being moved upon or manipulated; how the phenomenological encounter leaves traces on the scholar's own body and mind. The problem comes when these critical reflections are then extrapolated outwards to "the audience" as a whole. Spectatorship theories are useful in terms of the broader frameworks they provide, helping us to conceptualize the performance invitation in more nuanced ways, but they must never be conflated with the complexities of situated audience response. The invitation is not always equal to the reception. Your response is not necessarily everybody else's.

The audience studies field as pioneered by Ien Ang, Janice Radway, David Morley, Martin Barker, Sonia Livingstone, and many other prominent media scholars has long been interested in capturing the messy, situated reality of diverse spectatorial engagement (Sedgman, forthcoming). How do different people, coming at an event from different subject positions, take away from that event such different kinds of experience? What leads one person to feel they "got" a performance while others felt shut out? And how do audience members work through their memories and feelings about that encounter—via questionnaires, in interviews, through focus groups—within the social encounter of your particular research process? *This* is what I want to see more of. More research that seeks to understand experience "empirically": by observing spectators' behaviour, measuring their psychophysical reactions, analyzing data on attendance and ticket sales, and all those other brilliant things—but also, crucially, by *listening to audiences themselves*. For me, this has always meant paying close attention to the discursive and extra-discursive manoeuvres that audiences go through in order to explain their response to somebody else, and then analyzing this information *in context*:

This is the epistemological heart of the [empirical audience research] approach, and means asking very specific kinds of questions. For example, what might it mean to spontaneously leave a public comment on an online video of a once-live performance? During a one-on-one interview, how does an audience member navigate their reactions against the perceived status of the researcher? How do focus group participants use rhetorical manoeuvres to reach shared understandings (or emphatic dissent), and what hierarchical negotiations does this joint activity involve? Instead of claiming to be "representative" of the audience "as a whole," or elevating non-expert judgements over critically informed models, this approach reframes audience expertise as a sense-making process rather than a definitive valuation: as an emotive, cognitive, kinaesthetic act of negotiation that takes place in the time and space of a particular post-performance reflection. (Sedgman 2017, 314–15)

In my first book, *Locating the Audience*, I addressed at length all the reasons why "listening to audiences" might actually be a *bad* thing for a theatre scholar to do—ethically, aesthetically, methodologically, epistemologically—and so I am not going to retrace old ground here (Sedgman 2016, 24–26). What I will do, however, is to explain why *I* get excited about audience research. I love listening to people "reach for ways to describe experiences that so often are considered indescribable." I find pleasure in witnessing those moments where language reaches its limits: watching someone "shrug, or smile, or narrow their eyes, in order to better express a

response for which they could not find the words.” I am perennially fascinated by both the “words people choose” and “*how and how easily* they come to these words” (Sedgman 2016: 11). I believe that this mode of attention offers a route into understanding more about the arts experience itself—specifically, how it is experienced by different people in different ways—but also, crucially, how processes of valuation, judgment, and meaning-making are negotiated more broadly, within varying social contexts.

So: more empirical audience research, please. More research into a wider range of plays; more research into different productions of the same play; more research that explores audiences’ reactions to the same production of a play performed across different contexts; more research into audiences’ longitudinal relationships with a performance event, a theatre company, a theatre building; more research into performance forms that are not white-centric and/or “highbrow,” preferably performed by scholars who are themselves from communities whom the theatre industry has historically marginalized; more studies that combine methods and bring together researchers working in varying fields. It is my secret hope (now not so secret) that one day soon we’ll gather the resources to bring together theatre audience researchers working internationally in different disciplines, and enable each to apply their own methods to the study of a single theatrical phenomenon: combining box-office data analysis, quali-quant questionnaires, creative participatory workshops, impact metrics, interviews, cognitive science, and so on—then patterning findings, and reflecting on how the varying approaches used have drawn out specific—and dissimilar—kinds of information. Like a form of prismatic refraction: each method bringing into view a particular strand of knowledge.

So not just “more” audience research, then—it also needs to be *good* audience research (Sedgman, forthcoming). No matter which approach is taken, it seems clear that “good” audience research, broadly speaking, takes a critical perspective on the strengths and limitations of its methodology. It is therefore my hope that we will be ever more able to engage in the cross-disciplinary conversations necessary to learn from each other, building up a shared understanding of research rigour together, rather than hierarchizing approaches and reinventing the methodological wheel anew. It is here I feel particularly optimistic: because as my recent article surveying the field for *Theatre Research International* demonstrated (Sedgman 2017), theatre audience research has reached a turning point. The very fact that the Centre for Spectatorship and Audience Research (CSAR) and the international Network for Audience Research in the Performing Arts (iNARPA) sprang into being at about the same time attests to our field’s growing willingness to talk around and between our disciplinary silos. This is a hopeful time for theatre audience research.

I began my PhD in 2009 studying audiences’ engagements with the then brand new National Theatre Wales—the very same year that Helen Freshwater’s *Theatre & Audience* was published. A decade later, I’m finding I’m no longer the odd one out at conferences; no longer the only one taking an empirical approach to spectatorship. And yet despite the recent upsurge of interest, it seems clear that in many ways we are still just getting started. We may have been going since at least the 1980s (see Sedgman 2017 for examples of foundational work), and yet there’s still so much ground left to cover! Dozens of Ntozake Shange productions and thousands of Shakespeare; national spectaculars and intimate experiences; classic musicals and new writing; live art and live-streaming; promenade and the proscenium arch; Forced Entertainment and *Frozen* and *Faustus* and *Fame*. So much uncharted territory! Let’s map it together.

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