

Triple Play: Interview Protocols

INTERVIEWS – DESCRIPTION OF THE EXERCISE

Prepared by WolfBrown

As part of the Triple Play project, playwrights at each of the partnering theatres will be holding at least four interviews with individual audience members. We recommend scheduling all of these interviews on one day so that the interview schedule might look like this:

| | |
|-------|------------------------|
| 11:30 | Meet to review the day |
| 12:30 | Interview #1 |
| 1:30 | Break |
| 2:00 | Interview #2 |
| 3:00 | Break |
| 3:30 | Interview #3 |
| 4:30 | Break |
| 5:00 | Interview #4 |
| 6:00 | Debrief key findings |

Three people should be in the room for each interview: 1) the interviewee; 2) the playwright, serving in the role of interviewer, and 3) the theatre administrator, serving in the role of recorder. We recommend conducting the interviews in a comfortable, intimate, quiet space such as a Green Room or executive office. Conference rooms with large tables should be avoided.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewers should give a brief overview of the Triple Play project and introduce themselves and the recorder. The playwrights should introduce themselves as associates of the theatre, without identifying themselves as playwrights. If this comes up for some reason, interviewers can acknowledge that they are playwrights, but there is no need to volunteer this information and it may bias the respondents' answers.

During the interview, the interviewer should try to maintain a conversational tone while following the interview protocol as closely as possible. The interviewer should also keep an eye on the time. It may be necessary to skip some follow up questions in order to cover the full range of topics during the allotted time. If the respondent's answers are very concise and the interview progresses more quickly than anticipated, the interviewer may ask the respondent to elaborate, clarify, or provide specific examples. However, in many instances the best strategy for soliciting additional information is to nod encouragingly, smile, and wait five seconds. Often, respondents will volunteer additional information to fill the silence.

Both the interviewer and the recorder should try to make the respondent feel at ease. They should refrain from reacting verbally or physically in ways that would suggest that they approve or disapprove of the interviewee's responses. Their body language and demeanor should convey that they are friendly and interested in what the interviewee is saying, without being judgmental.

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While the recorders may participate in any small talk at the beginning and end of the interviews, they should not contribute to the interview or ask follow up questions. The exception is if the recorder needs to ask the respondent to repeat something important in order to capture it in the notes. On the whole the recorders should try to be neutral observers that fade into the background during the interview.

Recorders should capture the gist of the respondent's comments in a Word document, typing notes directly into a copy of the protocol. Occasionally, when a respondent says something particularly insightful or revealing, it is helpful to capture a few of these comments word-for-word, as they may be included in the summary report. The recorder's notes will serve as a memory aid to the playwrights when they prepare their reports on the exercise. After the interviews, playwrights may add their own observations, comments, and reactions to the recorder's notes, and this will become the surviving record of the interview. It may also be helpful to make an audio recording of the interview, which can be consulted if portions of the interviews aren't fully captured in the notes. However, it is very time consuming to listen to audio recordings of interviews, and we don't expect that level of effort.

Immediately after the discussion, the partners should debrief and make a short list of key findings. It is essential to do this immediately afterwards, or the next day. Otherwise, the data will quickly fade from memory.

Reporting and Synthesis Process

Following the interview exercise, the playwrights will type up brief summaries of key observations from the interviews (no more than three pages), and share it with the theatre partner, who may edit or embellish before submitting to WolfBrown. The purpose of these reports is to think across all four interviews and capture the range of responses that were heard, while keeping in mind that we can't generalize about all audiences based on four conversations. We also invite the interviewers to reflect on what they heard and note things that they found particularly interesting or surprising. WolfBrown will provide a template to assist the playwrights in composing these summary reports.

Once these reports have been submitted, the reports will be circulated and discussed. The reports will be compiled into a single Google document and shared with all of the participating playwrights. WolfBrown will then schedule a webinar with the playwrights in order to discuss the findings and identify key themes. Based on this discussion, WolfBrown will add a summary of the key findings at the top of the Google document, which the playwrights may then view and edit.

The final step of the synthesis will take place once the reports from both the interviews and the focus groups are available. At that point, theatres will be given access to the playwrights' interview report, and playwrights will be given access to the theatres' focus group report, allowing for a comparison of themes from both methodologies. TDF/TBA will then select 3 or 4 of the playwrights who will work independently to compose final syntheses that summarize the research findings and highlight lessons learned. These papers may be used as a source of dialogue for the convening at Arts Emerson.

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INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

[Make sure that the respondent is comfortable and has a bottle of water or another beverage. If necessary, point out the location of the nearest restroom.]

Context for the Discussion

[You may read, or paraphrase, the following introductory language]

Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview and for taking time out of your busy day to speak with us.

My name is [NAME], and I'm working with [NAME OF THEATRE] on a national study of theatregoers. My partner here is [NAME OF RECORDER], who will be observing our discussion and taking notes. A total of 11 theatres across the US are conducting interviews with small number of audience members, and will be sharing results. No identifying information will be attached to your responses, so only [NAME OF RECORDER] and I will know who you are, and we will treat your responses entirely confidentially. Our goal is to learn what you value about theatergoing in general, and specifically how you feel about seeing new plays.

There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Please be as candid as possible in responding, and don't hesitate to ask me to repeat or re-phrase a question if it's not clear.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Shall we start?

Introductory questions about the respondent's theatergoing

[The purpose of this module is to "warm up" the respondent, invoke memories of recent theatre experiences, and gain insight into what the respondent values about theatergoing.]

- 1. In completing the online survey, you mentioned that you attend [NAME OF THEATRES FROM SURVEY]. Is this a complete list of the theatres you attend, or are there others?
Probe: Do you feel a particular sense of loyalty to any of these theatres? Why is that?**
- 2. Thinking about all the live stage plays you've attended over the past few years, are there any productions that spring to mind as being exceptional for one reason or another?
Probe: What made that experience so memorable?**

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Probe: **Had you seen that play before? Were you familiar with the playwright's work?**

3. **When considering whether or not to attend a play, some people like to know a lot about the production, while other people don't need a lot of information in order to make a decision. Tell me a little about your criteria for deciding whether or not to attend a particular play. In other words, what attributes about a play matter to you the most?** [capture unaided response]
[If the respondent has difficulty answering, ask him/her to identify a specific outing, and then develop an answer based on that specific experience.]
[If necessary, focus the respondent on the intrinsic aspects of the artistic work, not the extrinsic attributes of the experience, like parking, venue, etc.]
Probe: **How about the playwright? Is it important that you know the playwright?**
Probe: **How about the plot or story line?**
Probe: **What else about the production is important to you to know about in advance?** [prompt as needed: the cast, the director]

Motivations for attending new plays

4. **Some people seek out new plays and playwrights that they haven't seen before, while other people enjoy seeing plays that they know and love. Where are you on this continuum?**
[This is a false dichotomy, but see how they answer]
[If necessary, define "new play" as "a recent theatrical work by a living playwright receiving its first production in your area."]
5. **When going to see a new play, there may be fewer sources of information about the play to access in advance. Does the fact that a play is new change your selection process in any way? How so?**

[Provide respondent with handout listing the following types of plays.]

6. **This sheet lists several different kinds of plays** [read list]:

World premieres of new plays

New plays that have been seen in other cities, but not here

Plays that have been around for years, but you haven't seen yet

Plays that you've already seen

Are any of these types of plays more or less appealing to you, all else being equal? [capture unaided response]

Probe: **Are these distinctions meaningful to you?**

7. **In general, would you say you're more or less likely to want to see a play because it's a world, national, or regional premiere?**

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Probe: **Does it matter to you that a new play has already been mounted in another city?**

Risk and Adventurousness

8. **Some people enjoy theatre that is challenging; that is, theatre that challenges their beliefs or their aesthetic sensibilities. How do you feel about theatre that is challenging in these ways?**

Probe: [If respondent seeks challenge] **Can theatre productions be too challenging?**

Probe: [If respondent avoids challenge] **What makes a theatrical work challenging to you?**

9. **Next, let's talk about the risks and rewards of seeing new plays by living playwrights. Let's start with the risks. Is there anything about a new work that would dissuade you from attending it?** [capture unaided response]

Probe: **Not knowing the work, or the playwright – is that a risk factor?**

Probe: **Is there any information that the theatre or the playwright could provide in advance that would help you decide whether a new play is right for you and thus reduce the risk?** [Encourage respondents to think outside the box: perhaps some sort of rating system? Or comparisons to plays or works of art – e.g. “if you liked X and Y, you might like this new play”]

10. **What do you like about seeing new work? What are the potential rewards?** [capture unaided response]

Probe: **Does the reward depend on the work itself, or is there anything inherently rewarding to you about seeing new work?**

Probe: **Can you give me an example of when you've reaped these rewards?**

11. **Can you think of a new play that you disliked for some reason, but that you still considered a rewarding experience?**

Probe: **What did you dislike about it?** [responses point to risk factors]

Probe: **Is it even possible to dislike a work and still feel that you had a rewarding experience?**

12. **Do you feel that audiences have a role to play in the *process* of creating new work? What role?**

[Does the respondent see audience as a collaborator with theatres and playwrights, or as playing a more limited role as recipient of polished work?]

Engagement preferences (before and after seeing new work)

13. **Some people love to study the plays they are about to see, and love to debate and discuss the work afterwards, while other people prefer to let the work stand on its own without a lot of context or dialogue. Where are you along this spectrum?**

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[This question probes the respondent's belief system around engagement]

14. **Think about all the things that theatres do to inform and enrich patrons' theatergoing experiences, both before and after performances. What one or two things have you found *most* helpful?** [capture unaided response; do *not* prompt with specific engagement activities; avoid using the word "engagement"]
Probe: **What, if anything, do you like to do to prepare for a play you've not seen before?**
Probe: **What, if anything, do you like to do *after* seeing a play, to reflect on the experience?**
15. **Do theatres do enough to help you prepare for new plays you're planning to see?**
Probe: **What more could they do?**

Desired interactions with playwrights/generative artists; how can playwrights add value to the exchange?

16. **If you could sit down for a chat with someone who is involved with the production of a new play that you're going to see, who would you want to chat with?** [capture unaided response]
Probe [if necessary]: **The artistic director of the theatre? The leading actors? The playwright?**
Probe: **What would you want to ask that person about?**
17. **Playwrights are often just a name on the playbill, with whom audience members have little or no personal connection. Suppose you had direct access to playwrights before and after seeing new plays. How would you like to interact with them?** [record unaided response]
Probe: **How comfortable would you be asking questions of a playwright about his or her work in a live setting?**
Probe: **Of course it's impossible for playwrights to attend every performance of their work. Would you watch a pre-recorded video of a playwright talking about a new play? What specific insight or information is most important to you?**
Probe: **How do you suppose playwrights feel about interacting with audience members about their work, before and after performances?**
18. **Would greater access to playwrights have any affect on your feelings about attending new work?**

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RESPONDENT HANDOUT

Four Types of Plays

1. World premieres of new plays
2. New plays that have been seen in other cities, but not here
3. Plays that have been around for years, but you haven't seen yet
4. Plays that you've already seen