



**Fostering an Appetite for New Work:
An Exploratory Investigation of Audiences
and Risk**

TDF/TBA Triple Play

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Introduction

To be healthy, the theatre field needs a continuous stream of new work, and audiences that are ready to receive it. Most everyone in the theatre ecosystem, it seems, wants to create work that resonates with audiences:

- Playwrights want to create work that gets produced and gains acceptance;
- Theatres want to produce work that receives critical acclaim, sells tickets, and motivates donors;
- Audiences want to see thoughtful, emotionally impactful, well-produced work.

Playwrights need financial resources, time, inspiration, and production support in creating new work. According to *Outrageous Fortune*, some playwrights reject the idea that new work necessarily should be “improved” through “testing” or “workshopping.” Regardless of how they feel about the audience’s role in developing new work, the work needs to resonate with audiences in some fashion, on some scale, whether large or small. In an ecological sense, living playwrights and other creators of new work need audiences as much as theatres do, although the situations in which creators interact with audiences are quite limited for a variety of good reasons.

Theatres need to engage audiences in order to build loyalty and sell subscriptions. But engagement is not just a sales strategy. It is a means of magnifying impact, and therefore increasing mission fulfillment. Research from *Counting New Beans* suggests that audience response is stronger when the audience is ready to receive the work, and when they engage afterwards in making meaning. So, engagement is strategic to the long-term health of the theatre field, including playwrights. To fully engage audiences in new work, therefore, theatres need the cooperation of playwrights – not necessarily to “improve” the work, but to assist audiences in constructing meaning.

In fact, audience engagement is a major focus in the theatre field. For example, [TCG’s Audience \(R\)Evolution initiative](#), funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, seeks “to study, promote and support successful audience engagement models across the country.”

Audiences experience theatre on continua of risk and familiarity. These factors are highly relative to the individual, and highly contextual. For example, a play that is “tried and true” to one theatregoer may be risky and unfamiliar to another. There is much to learn about how audiences perceive risk, and the extent to which it serves as a barrier or inducement. How should we think about risk? What kinds of audience members want to be involved in the development of new plays? Do audiences see themselves as being part of the creative cycle of the theatre field? What does it take for an audience member to feel involved in a new work? What do audiences want to know about a new work? What can theatres do to cultivate a sense of adventurousness and discovery amongst audiences?

This paper begins to explore these questions using existing data from several quantitative audience studies conducted by WolfBrown over the past eight years. It is offered as a provocation to theatres and playwrights, in hopes of sparking helpful debate about risk, education and engagement, and consideration of new approaches to creating theatrical experiences for the next generation of theatregoers.

Data Sources

This paper draws on a number of data sets from previous WolfBrown audience studies exploring risk, impact, and preferences for types of theatre activities. The identities of several of the studies are masked, given the proprietary nature of the research. Throughout the report, these studies are referred to by three character acronyms, as follows:

1. CNB. Counting New Beans (2011), a study of the intrinsic impacts of theatre, commissioned by Theatre Bay Area. This study involved in-venue surveys of audience members at 18 theatres in six US cities, encompassing 58 productions spanning a wide variety of plays and musicals. Almost 19,000 paper surveys were completed by respondents and returned via Business Reply Mail. Across the 18 theatres, response rates ranged from a low of 22% to a high of 66%. The report can be accessed at: <http://theatrebayarea.org/Programs/Intrinsic-Impact.cfm>
2. STC. A 2008 audience segmentation study for Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. The main sample was a random selection of ticket buyers from the 2007-08 season. Responses were generated through online surveying, with follow-up by US Mail, for an overall response rate of 24%. The protocol covered a wide range of questions about engagement in theatre, including several key questions about risk.
3. SCR. An audience segmentation study for South Coast Repertory, based in Orange County, California. This study, conducted in 2009, involved surveying a stratified sample of the theatre's ticket buyers, with the main sample being a random selection of ticket buyers over the past three seasons. Eligible respondents were surveyed initially online (via an email recruitment message). Then, non-respondents were mailed a paper survey, for an overall response rate of 34%. The survey protocol explored a range of attitudes about theatre, including a number of questions about risk. Many of the questions in this survey paralleled questions in the STC survey, allowing for comparison and crosschecking.
4. MUP. A multi-site, multi-disciplinary segmentation study of ticket buyers at 14 university performing arts presenting programs, commissioned by the Major University Presenters consortium in 2006. While theatre was not the sole focus of this survey, a question about interest in "new works by living playwrights" contributes to the pool of knowledge. The ticket buyer

segmentation report, and a companion report on donors, can be accessed at: <http://wolfbrown.com/insights/mup-value-a-impact-study>.

What is “Risk?”

What does existing research tell us about audiences’ appetite for risk, and their interest in new work?

Everyone, it seems, has a theory about what constitutes “risky” artistic work. Risky work might take an audience beyond its comfort zone. In programming risky work, theatres ask audiences to suspend judgment, make a leap of faith and trust in their artistic choices. According to artistic directors, audiences who appreciate risky work are tolerant of failure and imperfection, thus allowing the field to evolve and grow.

What is “risk” as applied to theatrical artistic work? The quotation marks surrounding this word are necessary because it has so many meanings and connotations. It is an unfortunate term in the sense that “risk” is generally regarded as something to be avoided (e.g., you are at risk of catching a cold). Many people relate to “risk” in the sense of investments (e.g., real estate, stocks, retirement accounts). Investors are at risk of losing money, but might also make money. In this context, many Americans have learned that risk can be calibrated to one’s individual goals and long-term needs. Here, risk has an upside. In the public consciousness, perhaps the most common understanding of risk (or misunderstanding, as it were) relates to gambling or any activity in which a small amount of expense or effort might yield a windfall, as with online dating. The analogy to art is not a stretch: you go out, have a lot of pleasant but unmemorable experiences, and, then, Wham! You hit the jackpot. As with sex and drugs, random encounters with art can forever change one’s brain chemistry. These peak artistic experiences, in turn, change one’s risk profile and propel the individual through the aesthetic landscape in search of new adventures.

And so, in a sense, we become addicted to art, or, in the age of unlimited access to digital content, numb to peak experiences. One hundred years ago, a music lover might’ve heard a great symphonic work once in his or her lifetime – live concerts being the only means of experiencing this music. Now, we can replay the greatest performances of our favorite music over and over, on demand. Images of the greatest works of art and sculpture in the world greet us every morning on our computer desktops. How this has impacted the public’s appetite for artistic risk is anyone’s guess, but it seems intuitive on some level that tolerance for “less than peak” experiences has diminished, gone the way of subtlety and good manners.

Risk is inherently relative to the risk-taker. Seeing an “old chestnut” for the first time might be perceived as “risky” to someone who’s never been to the theatre. *Will I understand it? Will I feel out of place?* A veteran theatregoer might consider the same production to be risky for an entirely different reason. *Will I be bored? Can this*

production live up to the experiences I've had with this play earlier in my life? In short, risk can be attractive or unattractive, depending on the risk-taker's profile.

While artistic directors, dramaturgs and playwrights have their own rubrics for risk, the question at hand is how audiences feel about risk, and if the construction of risk in minds of theatre professionals aligns with the theatergoing public's conception of risk. Can risk be deconstructed in a way that is helpful to theatres, playwrights and audiences?

In their paper, "Knowing and Measuring the Audience Experience," Radbourne, et al, identify three types of risk: 1) economic risk (e.g., the risk of spending money on an unfulfilling experience); 2) psychological risk (e.g., the risk of experiencing a work of art that disconfirms, challenges or contradicts one's self-concept or one's understanding of the world; and 3) social risk (e.g., apprehension about fitting in or feeling socially isolated or marginalized).¹

Much of the real estate surrounding "risk" pertains to factors that are extrinsic to the art itself. The calculus of "going out" is fraught with contingencies, trade-offs and unknown opportunity costs. *Will I be able to find someone to go out with? Will I find convenient transportation? Will I get lost trying to find the venue? Where can I park? What if it snows? Are good seats still available? Can I afford it? Can I change my mind at the last minute and cancel?* Any one of these or other factors might be a deal breaker, depending on the individual.

Evaluation of the risks associated with economic, social and logistical barriers, of course, does not occur in a vacuum. A consumer's assessment of extrinsic risk factors is offset by the promise of value – the expected value of spending quality time with a friend or family member (if not attending alone), and/or the expected value of seeing a work of art that (presumably) one wants to see. Does the promise of value exceed the sum of the perceived risks?

Notwithstanding the salience of extrinsic risks, this paper focuses on the intrinsic qualities of risk – those associated with the art itself. This raises the question about the extent to which intrinsic risks are perceived (i.e., based on missing or incomplete information, and therefore potentially biased or inaccurate) or informed (i.e., risks based on experience or good information, and therefore less biased). Clearly there is a blurry line between perceived and informed risk. Many purchase decisions are made based on sketchy information – the promise of value exceeds the sum of the risks without much product information. These may be knowledgeable, brand-loyal consumers, or they may be impatient, time-starved shoppers with a low threshold for absorbing product information.

¹ Radbourne, J. et al. (2013), Knowing and Measuring the Audience Experience, in Radbourne, J.,

Theatres have an interest in helping customers take informed risks, both to avoid unpleasant surprises when the lights go down and the curtain rises (hell hath no fury like an audience deceived), and to maximize impact.

Aspects of Intrinsic Risk

Based on a number of qualitative and quantitative studies, I hypothesize that intrinsic risk has the following negative and positive components. These lists are neither comprehensive nor based on a robust review of the research literature.

In assessing a prospective theatrical experience, negative risk factors include:

- Extent to which the work is unfamiliar to me, or if I've had a negative experience with the work in the past;
- Extent to which the playwright is unfamiliar to me, or if I've had a negative experience with the playwright's work in the past;
- Extent to which the subject, theme, or format of the work is unclear, confusing, or not appealing to me;
- Extent to which the director's interpretation of the work (as conveyed through marketing channels) is dissonant with my conceptualization of how the work should be presented;
- Extent to which I perceive that the work will challenge or contradict my social, political or religious beliefs or values, when this is likely to leave me feeling angry, threatened or invalidated;
- Extent to which I perceive that the work will offend my sense of propriety through excessive use of vulgar language, nudity or sexually explicit scenes;
- Extent to which I perceive that the work will leave me feeling sad or disturbed, when feeling sad or disturbed is seen as a negative outcome;
- Extent to which I perceive that I am not knowledgeable or sophisticated enough to understand or appreciate the work (unlike the other items on this list, this item does not pertain solely to the nature of the artistic work, but to the individual's self-evaluation of his/her own ability to engage with the work).

Counterbalancing these negative risk factors are several positive risk factors:

- Extent to which lack of familiarity with the work or playwright is offset by the involvement of a "star" actor or director, thereby reducing risk;
- Extent to which the subject matter of the artistic work has a special resonance with my life experience;
- Extent to which I know and like the story/plot/narrative;
- Extent to which I trust the company's artistic choices, based on reputation or positive experiences in the past;
- Level of confidence in my own abilities to engage with unfamiliar theatrical work, and the extent to which I purposefully select art for myself that

expands my understanding of theatre and propels me on a lifelong aesthetic adventure;

- My awareness of resources provided by the theatre to help me understand and negotiate the work, and my likelihood of accessing them;
- Extent to which I believe that audiences (myself included) can/should play a role in the evolution of the form, by seeing or co-creating new work;
- Extent to which I see myself as being at the forefront of contemporary art and ideas.

All these factors amount to a very complex and context-dependent landscape of risk. Given this complexity, it is possible to simplify the notion of risk?

Indicators of Risk

All theatrical work, both new and old, takes the audience on a journey of discovery of some sort. It seems reasonable to assume that virtually all audience members embark on their theatrical experiences with a sense of adventure. No matter how conventional or unconventional the work, adventure is itself inherent to the form. In a sense, this is the lowest common denominator of risk. On some level, therefore, going to the theatre is an act of discovery. The degree to which an audience member cognates risk – or actually values risk – is another matter entirely.

A very rough indicator of risk tolerance is available in the MUP survey of dance, music and theatre buyers, where 7,433 respondents answered the reductive question:

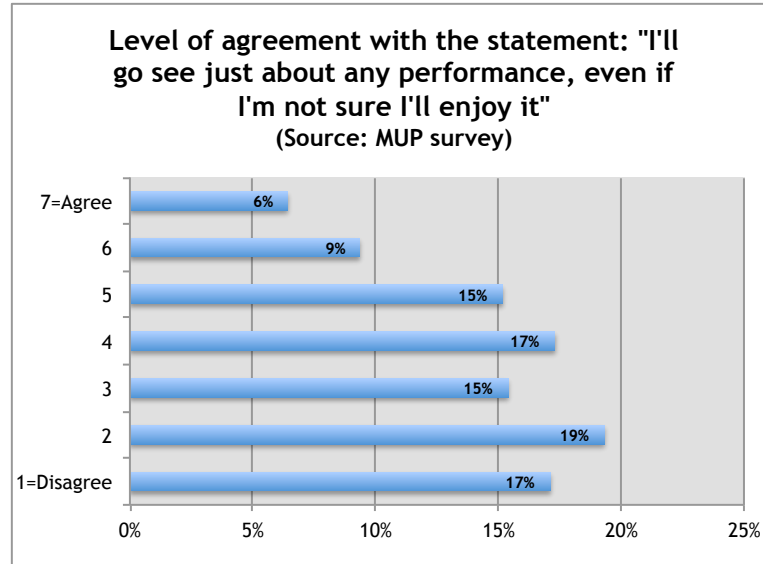
“Suppose you are planning an outing to a live performance. There are two choices. One is sure to be enjoyable and straightforward in terms of subject matter, and the other is a riskier proposition in that the meaning of the work might be unclear, and you may love it or hate it, depending on how it goes. All else being equal, which one would you choose?”

Results

65%	The sure choice
35%	The riskier alternative

Roughly a third of respondents indicated a certain level of adventurousness by answering “the riskier alternative.” Another indicator of adventurousness in the MUP survey asks respondents how much they agree or disagree that “I’ll go see just about any performance, even if I’m not sure I’ll enjoy it” (Figure 1). Using this indicator, about 30% of all respondents express an above-average level of adventurousness (i.e., scores of 5, 6 or 7 on a scale of 1 to 7). Only 6% elected the highest point in the scale.

Figure 1: An Indicator of Adventurousness (MUP survey)



Looking at adventurousness through the lens of motivations for attending sheds additional light on the subject. When presented with a list of 11 motivations for attending, 44% of CNB respondents chose “to discover something new” as one of their top three motivations for attending. (Here we are talking about theatre audiences, exclusively.) For experimental work, the figure rises to 57%. Those who set out to discover something new were, in fact, significantly more likely than those who didn’t to report being exposed “to a style or type of theatre or a playwright that you did not know about previously” (i.e., aesthetic growth). Overall, two-thirds of all CNB respondents reported average or above average figures for aesthetic growth, suggesting widespread exposure to unfamiliar playwrights and work. Moreover, aesthetic growth figures for veteran theatregoers were only slightly lower than comparable figures for respondents who are less familiar with theatre in general.

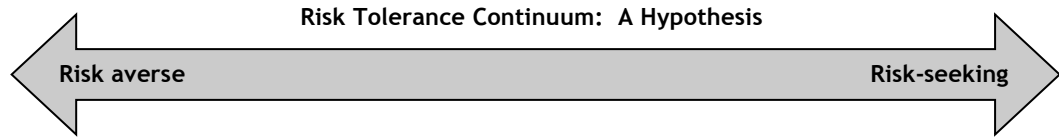
While there is a natural tendency to value audiences who seek out risk – the loyalists who show up for pretty much anything we put on – we must appreciate the innate adventurousness of the majority of the audience, however conservative or progressive their tastes in theatre. They are constantly seeing work that is unfamiliar to *them*, and thereby learning and growing as theatregoers.

What does the continuum look like, from risk averse, to risk seeking? We all know people at both ends of the spectrum – those who avoid risk at all cost and choose work that is comforting and familiar – and those who turn away from conventional work, choosing unusual and experimental work that pushes the boundaries of the form. This is, of course, not an either-or duality. The same individual might appreciate experimental or challenging work as well as traditional or conventional work.

For the purposes of debate, let’s assume that an individual theatre patron, at a given moment in time, exists somewhere along a continuum of risk tolerance, ranging from risk averse on the low end, to risk seeking on the high end (Figure 2). Most certainly this is reductive and overly simplistic. The same individual might have very different

ideas about risk within different areas of the canon (e.g., classical vs. contemporary theatre). Moreover, different individuals will associate different levels of “risk” with the same artistic work. Nonetheless, the proposed continuum provides a hypothesis that can be tested with audience data.

Figure 2: Risk Tolerance Continuum

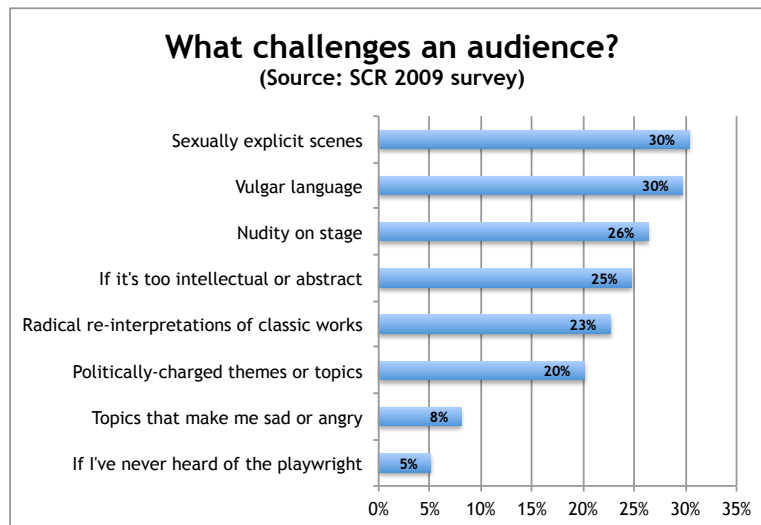


There is good evidence to suggest a sizable portion of the audience lives at the “risk averse” end of the continuum. In several audience studies across the art forms, segments of ticket buyers have been defined as “serenity-seekers” or “conservative comfort-seekers.” In general, these individuals prefer familiar work that validates their existing preferences, steers clear of controversial subject matter, and leaves them feeling happy or inspired. They tend to have lower frequency of attendance. The size of this segment will vary, but has ranged from 15% to 20% of all buyers.

What Challenges Audiences about a Play?

Ticket buyers in the SCR sample were asked, “In general, what makes you uncomfortable or unenthusiastic about seeing a play? Assume that no children are accompanying you.” Eight answer items were provided (Figure 3). A third of respondents did not indicate that any of these items were challenging. Overall, “sexually-explicit scenes” and “vulgar language” were cited most frequently at 30%, followed by “nudity on stage” (26%) and “If its too intellectual or abstract” (25%).

Figure 3: What challenges an audience?



Factor analysis suggests three natural groupings of challenges: 1) aspects of the play that are likely to offend based on the audience member's sense of propriety (e.g., nudity, sex, vulgar language); 2) concerns about the subject matter or difficulty level of the play; and 3) lack of familiarity with the playwright (a small factor). Typically, subscribers and multi-buyers reported fewer challenges than infrequent single ticket buyers. Underlying this relationship is knowledge level: Respondents who reported higher levels of knowledge about theatre reported fewer challenges, on average. As might be expected, older respondents reported more challenges than younger respondents, but the relationship is less significant than knowledge level.

An Attitudinal Model of Risk

Respondents in the SCR study were asked their level of agreement with three attitudinal statements designed to indicate risk tolerance:

- A. *I appreciate plays that address sensitive issues or problems such as domestic violence.*
- B. *I am drawn to plays that take me out of my comfort zone.*
- C. *I can have a successful evening at South Coast Repertory, even if I don't enjoy the play.*

Of the three individual statements, more respondents are likely to appreciate plays that address sensitive issues, with 57% reporting an answer above the mid-point of the agree/disagree scale (i.e., a score of 5 or higher on a scale of 1 to 7). Somewhat fewer – exactly half of the sample – reported an answer above the mid-point for “I am drawn to plays that take me out of my comfort zone.” Most SCR ticket buyers cluster around the mid-point of this scale, with a slight skew to the high end. These two indicators of risk are highly correlated, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of .74 (with 1.0 being a perfect positive correlation, and -1.0 being a perfect negative correlation). The third statement however, correlates with the other two indicators at a lower level (.43), suggesting that it adds something different to the risk pool. Again, roughly half of respondents reported an answer above the mid-point, although more respondents fall at the very low end of the scale for this indicator. About one in four respondents disagree strongly that they can have a successful evening of theatre if they don't enjoy the play (scores of 1 or 2, on a scale of 1 to 7), and another one in four agree strongly (scores of 6 or 7).

Responses to the three attitudinal indicators of risk tolerance were aggregated and standardized to allow for further analysis. As would be expected, responses to the eight “challenge” factors (i.e., nudity, vulgar language, etc.) relate strongly to the attitudinal indicator of risk tolerance, explaining about 29% of the variance. Of the eight challenge factors, two rise to the top in terms of their association with risk tolerance: 1) “topics that make me sad or angry,” and 2) “politically-charged themes or topics.” At the other end of the spectrum, “sexually explicit scenes” contribute almost nothing in terms of predictive power over risk tolerance, although nudity is a more of a predictor.

Once again, knowledge level is highly predictive of risk tolerance. Those with higher levels of knowledge about theatre are much more likely to indicate a higher tolerance for risk. The same is true for frequency: subscribers and multi-buyers reported higher

risk tolerance levels compared to single buyers. Women and men are equally risk tolerant.

Two reasons for attending SCR plays are highly associated with the aggregated indicator of risk tolerance: 1) “to expose myself to new ideas and different viewpoints,” and 2) “to discover new plays or playwrights.” The first of these factors contributes almost twice as much explanatory power than the second, suggesting a strong association between a respondent’s own sense of her intellectual gregariousness and risk tolerance. Two other variables also add explanatory power to the aggregated indicator of risk tolerance: 1) level of agreement with the statement, “I’ll go see almost anything SCR puts on regardless of the program details” (i.e., the trust factor), and 2) whether or not the respondent currently does, or used to, “rehearse or perform in plays or musicals” (i.e., current or past active involvement in the form).

Results of a Similar Analysis of a Different Data Set

A similar analysis was conducted on the 2008 STC dataset. Many of the same questions were covered in the protocol (with minor language changes), allowing for a roughly parallel analysis. In this case, four attitudinal indicators (agree/disagree statements) were aggregated into a single combined indicator of risk tolerance:

- A. *I avoid plays that address sensitive issues or problems such as domestic violence.* [indicator of risk aversion]
- B. *I avoid plays with vulgar language, violence, or explicit sexual content.* [indicator of risk aversion]
- C. *I enjoy being taken beyond my comfort zone with a piece of theatre.* [indicator of risk-seeking]
- D. *I enjoy plays without a clear narrative (i.e., abstract or non-linear form).* [indicator of risk-seeking]

Similar results were observed in terms of the strong relationship between risk tolerance and self-reported knowledge level and trust in the institution’s artistic choices. In this sample, however, subscriber status and tenure are not correlated with risk tolerance. In fact, in a multiple regression analysis incorporating knowledge, trust, aspirational frequency, loyalty, inclination to subscribe, and tenure, inclination to subscribe actually has a negative association with risk tolerance at a moderate significance level.

Five motivations for attending have strong associations with risk tolerance, three positively, and two negatively. The three positive associations are: 1) “to be fully absorbed in the drama and lose track of everything else;” 2) “to discover new plays or playwrights;” and 3) to challenge my assumptions and ideas about the world. These motivational factors help to predict risk tolerance. The connection between risk tolerance and the second two of these motivations is intuitive, but the first one is provocative. Audience members who seek deeply captivating theatre experiences are more likely to seek out challenging work. On the negative side, “to spend quality

time with my friends/family” (i.e., social motivation), and “to be inspired or uplifted” are negatively correlated with risk tolerance.

What attributes of a play are associated with risk tolerance? The STC survey allows for deeper exploration of the individual attributes of a play and their relationship with risk tolerance. Attributes of a theatrical production that are positively associated with risk tolerance include: 1) “the director;” and 2) “your familiarity with the playwright.” In other words, people who attach more salience to these attributes are significantly more likely to report higher levels of risk tolerance. On the negative side, two attributes are negatively correlated with risk tolerance at a significant level: 1) “your familiarity with the title of the play;” and 2) “the venue in which the plays will be performed.” In other words, people who care about these things tend to be more risk averse. Two other attributes have no significant explanatory power over risk tolerance: 1) “the casting;” and 2) “your level of interest in the subject matter or plot of the play.” It is a little surprising that “the casting” isn’t more closely associated with risk tolerance, based on the premise that people who care about casting are more likely to be more adventurous STC theatregoers, but this is not the case. Casting is important (or unimportant) to everyone, regardless of risk tolerance. And the same goes for the subject matter or plot.

Based on the foregoing analyses, we are able to hypothesize a more robust indicator of risk tolerance, which might include some combination of the following variables:

Agree/Disagree statements

- A. *I appreciate plays that address sensitive issues or problems.* [openness to challenging subject matter]
- B. *I am drawn to plays that take me out of my comfort zone.* [self-perception as a risk-seeker]
- C. *I can have a successful evening at [this theatre], even if I don’t enjoy the play.* [recognition that theatre doesn’t have to be “enjoyable” in order to be valuable]
- D. *I’ll go see almost anything [this theatre] puts on regardless of the program details.* [adventurousness, trust]

Other Variables (ordered by explanatory power over A, B and C)

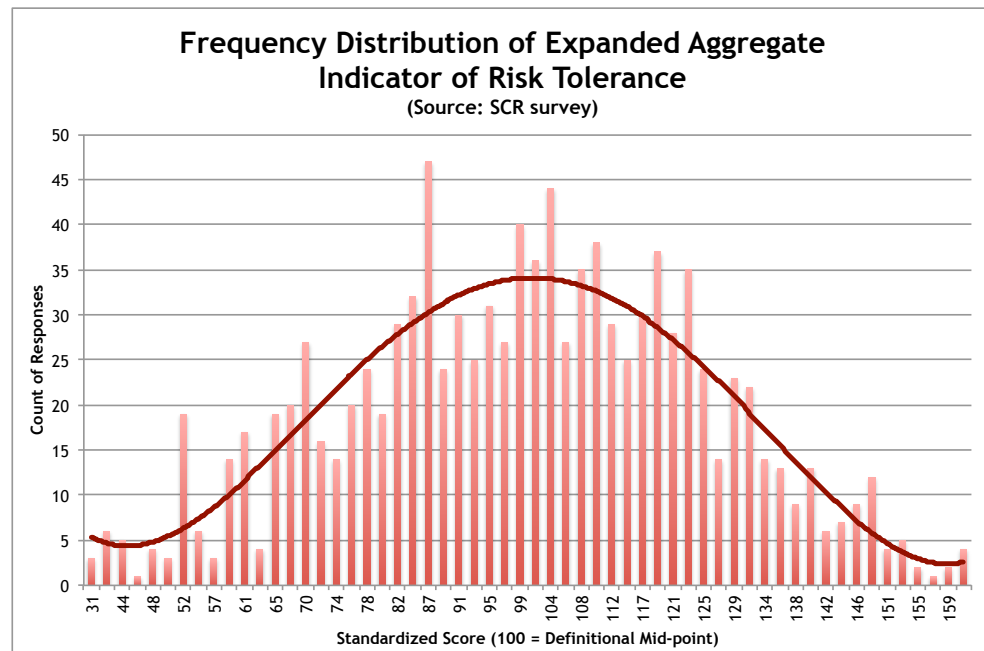
- E. Motivation for attending: To expose myself to new ideas and different viewpoints [self-perception as intellectually gregarious]
- F. Current or past involvement in performing in plays or musicals [personal background in theatre]
- G. Motivation for attending: To discover new plays or playwrights [desire to explore the canon]
- H. Self-reported level of knowledge about theatre [self-reported depth of knowledge of theatre]

Further refinement of the model will be necessary, with the ultimate test being the power of self-reported attitudinal indicators to predict purchase of “risky” or challenging plays and musicals. With a better theoretical model of risk tolerance, we can assess audiences at different theatres for this trait, and work to understand how it

changes over time, and what sorts of programs and activities are most likely to move the needle.

To explore additional relationships, an expanded algorithm for risk tolerance was created based on the eight variables listed above, using SCR audience data. Examination of the frequency distribution (Figure 4) points to a normal “Bell curve” distribution around the mean. There are good numbers of respondents on either side of the mean, suggesting the viability of a risk tolerance continuum.

Figure 4: Distribution of Expanded Indicator of Risk Tolerance (SCR survey)



It should be noted that this expanded indicator of risk tolerance is highly predictive of institutional loyalty (i.e., “How strong of an allegiance or bond do you have with the SCR organization?”), explaining 21% of the variance.

Relationships between Risk Tolerance and Engagement

How does risk tolerance relate to engagement? Regression analysis suggests strong positive relationships between risk tolerance and engagement in both pre-performance and post-performance activities, although the relationship is quite a bit stronger for post-performance engagement. Of course this finding does not suggest causality in one direction or the other – post-performance engagement might lead to greater risk tolerance, or increased risk tolerance might lead to more frequent engagement in post-performance activities. Both are plausible, and most likely they are symbiotic in some fashion.

Specific forms of pre-performance engagement that are statistically associated with risk tolerance include (in order of influence, as indicated by the beta coefficients from multiple regression output):

- Read SCR's newsletter (2.86)
- Read the play in advance of attending (2.21)
- Attend open rehearsals (1.81)
- Attend pre-performance scholarly lectures (1.76)

Three forms of pre-performance engagement are *not* statistically associated with risk tolerance. These are: read the program before curtain; seek out information about the play online; and read a critic's review of a production you plan to see.

Specific forms of post-performance engagement that are statistically associated with risk tolerance include (in order of influence):

- Stay afterwards for talk-backs with artists involved in the play (3.04)
- Join informal discussion circles in the lobby or outside (2.35)
- Seek information about the cast, director, or production online (1.49)
- Talk about the play on the way home or over drinks or dinner (1.38)
- Read a critic's review of the play (1.11)

Two forms of post-performance engagement are *not* statistically associated with risk tolerance. These are: "react to the play in an online blog or the SCR website"; and "get a follow-up email from SCR with a keepsake photo or other information."

Altogether the 14 pre- and post-performance engagement activities tested in the SCR survey explain about 35% of the variance in risk tolerance, suggesting a close relationship, and underscoring the overall importance of engagement to increasing risk tolerance in the long run.

Results of the STC survey are somewhat different in regards to engagement. None of the seven pre-performance activities are significantly associated with risk tolerance, while three of the six post-performance activities are significantly associated with risk tolerance: 1) "talk about the play with others on the way home, or over drinks or dinner;" 2) "discuss the play with others over the ensuing weeks and months;" and 3) "find out more about the cast, director, or production team." In this survey, "stay afterwards for post-performance discussions" is not a significant predictor of risk tolerance. This may relate to Steppenwolf's practice of running post-performance talks after every performance, allowing a wide cross-section of the audience to engage in this fashion. Altogether the 13 pre- and post-performance engagement activities tested in the STC survey explain about 8% of the variance in risk tolerance – a figure much lower than the SCR figure of 35%. In other words, the risk tolerance profile of STC audience members is less tied to their engagement activities, compared to SCR audience members. This might be explained, in part, by the relatively higher availability of professional theatrical activities in Chicago compared to Orange County, California. The most consistent finding across the two datasets is the significance of post-performance engagement in predicting risk tolerance –

developing a habit of critical reflection, especially dialogue between and amongst audience members.

Who wants to take part in the development of new work?

Who is the audience for new play development workshops and readings? What kinds of people want to attend readings of new work? Are the people who attend new work readings actually more risk tolerant than those who do not? Is there some other distinguishing characteristic? Addressing these questions in a substantial way would require a good deal of original research or sourcing of existing studies commissioned by theatres that engage audiences in new play development, which was beyond the scope of this paper. The challenge with this line of investigation is generating comparable data (i.e., comparing audiences for new play readings and workshops with audiences for main stage work, with other variables held constant).

In a 2006 survey of 7,493 ticket buyers at 14 university presenting programs (the MUP sample, including music, dance and theatre buyers), 39% said they have a “big appetite” for “new works by living playwrights.” Another 51% said they have “some appetite,” and only 10% said they have “little or no appetite.” For context, more respondents reported a “big appetite” for new theatrical work (39%) compared to “new dances by living choreographers” (31%) and “new compositions by living composers” (16%). There is no significant relationship between age and appetite for new theatrical work. Holding all else constant, women are more likely than men to report a big appetite for new theatrical work, although the difference (i.e., effect size, eta squared = .006) is not consequential. A significant positive relationship was observed between liberal political views and appetite for new theatrical work, with a modest effect size (eta squared = .015). Several attitudinal statements are significantly correlated with appetite for new theatrical work (in order of influence):

- *“Being on the cutting edge of new art and ideas”*
- *“Social justice and equal opportunity”*
- *“Feeling the extremities of emotion through art”*
- *“Making new friends and expanding your social network”*
- *“Always exploring, discovering, and hoping to be surprised”*

Together, these attitudinal statements explain about 10% of the variance in appetite for new theatrical work. In general, these results point to intuitive associations between appetite for new theatrical work and liberal political views, intellectual gregariousness, and emotional vulnerability.

An Interesting Side Note

In the 2006 MUP survey, an exploratory line of questioning asked respondents to self-report their “intelligences” based on Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (Table 1).² Of the nine intelligences tested, three produced significant positive associations in a multiple regression analysis with “appetite for new works by living playwrights” as the dependent variable (in order of influence): 1) interpersonal intelligence; 2) visual-spatial intelligence; and 3) linguistic intelligence. Musical intelligence was found to be negatively associated with appetite for new theatrical work, at a significant level. The other five intelligences were not predictive.

Table 1: Exploratory Analysis of Appetite for New Theatrical Work and Gardner’s Intelligences (MUP survey)

Exploratory Analysis of Statistical Relationships between Appetite for New Theatrical Work and Gardner's Intelligences, as Self-Reported by 7,120 Ticket Buyers (MUP sample)			
Type of Intelligence, based on Gardener's theory	Agree/Disagree Statement	Unstandardized beta coefficient	Significance
Linguistic Intelligence	I'm a language-oriented person and excel naturally at writing and speaking clearly and persuasively.	0.032	0.000
Logical-mathematic Intelligence	I excel at logical analysis and mathematical computation.	0.002	0.705
Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence	I'm a kinetically-oriented person with excellent coordination and a keen sense of movement.	0.004	0.495
Musical Intelligence	I'm a musically-oriented person with a good ear for harmony and melody.	-0.024	0.000
Visual-Spatial Intelligence	I'm a visually-oriented person, attuned to color, texture and form, and love to manipulate images in my mind.	0.042	0.000
Naturalistic Intelligence	I'm a naturalist, with a strong sense about plants, animals and the elements of nature.	-0.003	0.534
Interpersonal Intelligence	I'm naturally good at interpersonal relations; I understand what motivates people and am very good at working out “people problems.”	0.054	0.000
Intrapersonal Intelligence	I'm particularly in tune with my own feelings, goals, fears and strengths.	-0.001	0.893
Existential Intelligence	I'm inclined to ponder the larger questions about life, destiny and the supernatural.	0.004	0.431

In similar analyses for the other two art forms, appetite for new compositions by living composers is predicted by musical intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, and existential intelligence. Appetite for new dances by living choreographers is predicted by bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, and interpersonal intelligence, and negatively associated with logical-mathematical intelligence and musical intelligence. While most of these associations are intuitive, it is quite provocative that interest in

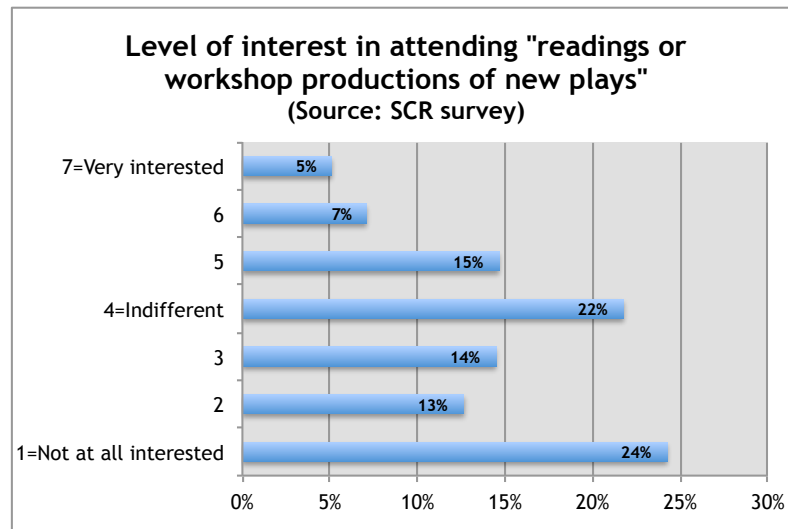
² *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner, 1983, 1993, published by Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.

all three forms of new work is indicated by interpersonal intelligence (i.e., “I’m naturally good at interpersonal relations; I understand what motivates people and am very good at working out ‘people problems’”). Moreover, interpersonal intelligence outweighs visual-spatial and linguistic intelligence in indicating interest in new theatrical work. One might infer from this that an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, both in marketing messages and engagement activities, might attract and engage audiences in new theatrical work.

While the MUP sample seems to suggest broad interest in “new plays by living playwrights” (i.e., four in ten respondents have a “big appetite”), when interest in new work is framed more narrowly in terms of attending readings or workshop productions of new plays, interest appears to narrow quite a bit, based on the analysis that follows. Although no conclusions can be drawn, one might hypothesize that while a sizable percentage of the audience is interested in “new” (i.e., contemporary) work, significantly fewer are interested in the *process* of developing new work.

Respondents to the SCR survey were queried as to their level of interest in “attending readings or workshop productions of new plays” using a scale of 1 to 7, where 1=Not at all interested, 4=Indifferent, and 7=Very interested, with the following results (Figure 5A):

Figure 5A: Interest in “attending readings or workshop productions of new plays” (SCR survey)

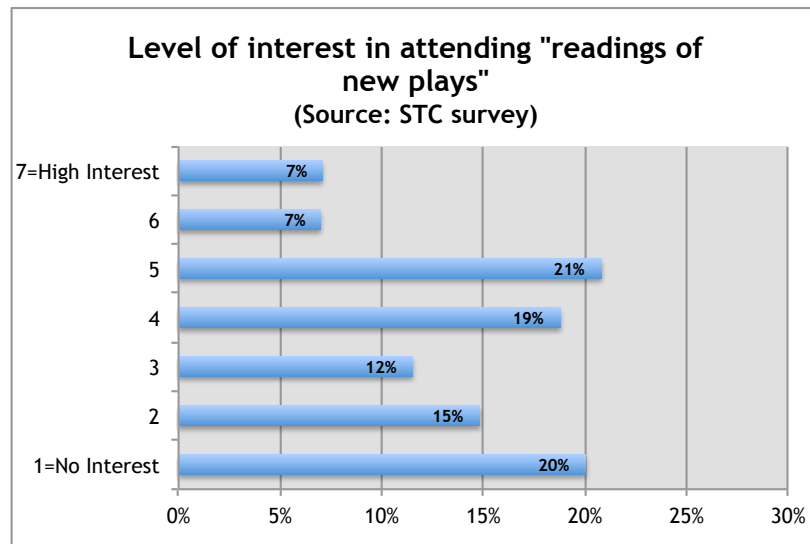


A relatively small segment of the SCR base of ticket buyers is very interested in attending new play readings or workshop productions (12% answered 6 or 7, on a scale of 1 to 7). There is no significant relationship with age or gender. As would be expected, however, a strong statistical relationship was found between level of interest in attending readings or workshop productions of new plays and the aggregated indicator of risk tolerance (about 25% of the variance is explained). Among the individual indicators of knowledge, trust, loyalty, tenure, aspirational

frequency of attendance, and inclination to subscribe, only knowledge, trust and aspirational frequency of attendance are predictive of interest in attending new play readings.

STC survey respondents reported similar levels of interest in “attending new play readings” (Figure 5B), which is a bit surprising in relation to SCR. One might have thought STC audiences to be more interested in engaging with new work, given the prevalence of new work in STC’s programming. The questions were worded a bit differently, but both used a similar seven-point scaled response, and results should be roughly comparable. In the STC survey, there is no significant relationship with gender, but younger respondents are significantly more likely than older respondents to be interested in attending new play readings. When knowledge and personal involvement in theatre (i.e., acting) are incorporated into the predictive relationship, however, age fades in importance.

Figure 5B: Interest in “attending readings of new plays” (STC survey)



One hypothesis to explore is that those who are actively involved in theatre – as performers, writers, etc. – are more likely to attend readings or workshop productions of new plays. Analysis of the SCR data file suggests this is true, but the findings are somewhat surprising. Of the eight forms of theatre participation tested in the survey, four activities contribute significantly to predicting interest in new play readings (in order of predictive power, using unstandardized beta coefficients):

- Contribute to online blogs or forums about theatre (.200)*
- Read plays on your own for enjoyment (.142)*
- Read books or blogs about theatre (.122)*
- Write scripts or screenplays (.127)*
- Rehearse or perform in plays or musicals (.099)*

**significant at the .01 level in a multiple regression analysis with interest in “attending readings or workshop productions or new plays” as the dependent variable*

Active involvement in theatre (i.e., acting, volunteering) is less predictive of interest in new play readings than intellectual forms of engagement (e.g., reading plays, reading/writing blogs about theatre, writing scripts). Quite simply, the data suggests that theatres that want to cultivate interest in new works should be encouraging audience members to read plays at home. These four activities explain 17% of the variance in interest in attending readings or workshop productions of new plays.

A similar analysis of data from the STC survey corroborates the SCR analysis. In a multiple regression analysis with interest in “attending readings of new plays” as the dependent variable, four theatre activities exert a significant amount of influence (in order of predictive power, using unstandardized beta coefficients):

- Read plays on your own for enjoyment (.592)*
 - Write, perform in, or work on plays or musicals (.306)*
 - Travel to other cities for the purpose of seeing theatre (.214)*
 - Read blogs about theatre or comment on blogs (.159)*
- *significant at the .01 level in a multiple regression analysis with interest in “attending readings of new plays” as the dependent variable*

These four activities explain 25% of the variance in interest in attending new play readings. Note that “reading critical reviews of theatre productions” is not predictive of risk tolerance in this analysis.

Other Engagement Activities Associated with Interest in Attending Readings or Workshop Productions of New Plays

Of the seven pre-performance activities tested in the SCR survey, three are significant predictors of interest in new play readings: 1) attend open rehearsals; 2) read the play in advance of attending; and 3) attend pre-performance scholarly lectures. This is intuitive. It is interesting to note that “read a critic’s review of a production you plan to see” is negatively correlated with interest in new play readings. Of the seven post-performance activities tested, two are significant predictors of interest in new play readings: 1) stay afterwards for talk-backs with artists involved in the play; and 2) join informal discussion circles in the lobby or outside (i.e., the more active or “brainy” forms of engagement). Here again, “read a critics review of the play” is negatively associated with interest in new play readings, suggesting a certain independence of thought (or a distrust of critics) amongst those who are most interested in new play readings. Very similar results were found in the STC dataset.

Overall, the SCR and STC surveys suggest that interest in attending readings or workshop productions of new plays is most closely associated with a high knowledge of theatre, a high level of trust in the theatre’s artistic choices, a general sense of intellectual adventure, and personal involvement in the art form (e.g., acting). A variety of engagement activities such as open rehearsals, at-home script reading, and

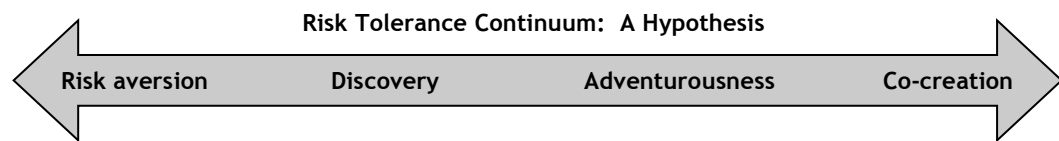
post-performance discussions and forums might be seen as a “ramp” towards drawing audiences into the process of creating new work.

Based on the preceding analyses, one might hypothesize a multi-stage model of risk tolerance that provides more nuance than the simple continuum posited in Figure 1.

A Four-Stage Model of Risk Tolerance

- Stage 1: Risk aversion – characterized by self-selection into familiar work, or work that is not challenging
- Stage 2: Discovery – characterized by an openness to unfamiliar theatrical experiences, but not necessarily new or challenging work
- Stage 3: Adventurousness – characterized by a desire to explore the canon by attending new and unfamiliar theatrical work
- Stage 4: Co-creation – characterized by a desire to play an active role in the development of new work

Figure 6: Four-Stage Model of Risk Tolerance



How does one create a pathway from one end of this spectrum to the other? Clearly the definitional lines between the stages are blurry. What behaviors and attitudes demarcate the four stages? It seems reasonable to believe that this model is both stepwise and progressive – that an individual theatregoer progresses from one stage to the next, but does not skip from one end to the other. It would be nice to think that progression through the model is cumulative over a lifetime of theatergoing – that an individual only moves forward, and not backwards, through the continuum. But of course life is never so simple. Does risk tolerance fade as we age? Are there generational patterns? In reality, little is known about how individuals progress through the aesthetic arc of theatre and drama over their lifetimes – because the research would take a lifetime.

What happens when audiences engage around new or risky work?

If one makes the leap of faith that theatregoers progress through some sort of an arc of risk tolerance over their lifetimes, this raises the question of how different types of theatrical experiences impact theatregoers along the continuum, and how to maximize impact along the way.

Results from the CNB study established a significant relationship between familiarity and anticipation, and, in turn, a strong relationship between anticipation and impact.

Three aspects of familiarity exert a positive effect on anticipation (in order of influence): 1) familiarity with the story or plot; 2) familiarity with the cast; and 3) familiarity with the playwright. Together, these three aspects of familiarity explain 8% of the variance in anticipation (i.e., “How much were you looking forward to this performance?”). However, the connection between familiarity and impact is weaker. Only “familiarity with the story or plot” has significant predictive power over summative impact (i.e., “Overall at what level were your expectations fulfilled for this performance?”), explaining about 3% of the variance. In general, one might conclude that lack of familiarity with some aspect of a theatrical work tends to countervail impact, suggesting that theatres have to work harder to assure the impact of new or unfamiliar work. Contextualization efforts would seem to offset this liability.

Do people who prepare for a theatrical experience get more out of it? On average, CNB data suggests that doing something – anything – to prepare for a theatrical work is weakly correlated to anticipation, and very weakly correlated with summative impact. These relationships are statistically significant (mostly because the sample size is so large), but hold little predictive power. Some people prepare, others don’t, and both can have impactful experiences. More research is needed to understand specifically what kind of contextual information is most likely to heighten anticipation and lead to higher levels of impact.

Post-performance engagement, however, is more closely associated with summative impact. Respondents who said they had an “intense exchange” about the play with others who attended were significantly more likely to report higher impact. The CNB survey tested six specific post-performance engagement activities, all of which correlated significantly with summative impact, as follows (in order of influence, as indicated by unstandardized beta coefficients from regression output):

- Email or speak to a friend about the performance (.437)*
- React to the performance online or through social media (.324)*
- Read the program booklet more closely (.308)*
- Reflect privately about the meaning of the work without discussing with others (.265)*
- Attend a post-performance discussion (.202)*
- Search for more information online (.139)*

**significant at the .01 level in a multiple regression analysis with summative impact as the dependent variable*

Together, these six activities explain 10% of the variance in summative impact. It is especially interesting to note that post-performance discussions are less influential in this equation than spontaneous discussion outside of the venue, and through social media.

Do people who perceive higher risk associated with a given production do more to prepare for it? On average, 24% of CNB respondents reported doing anything to prepare for the performance they attended, with figures for individual productions

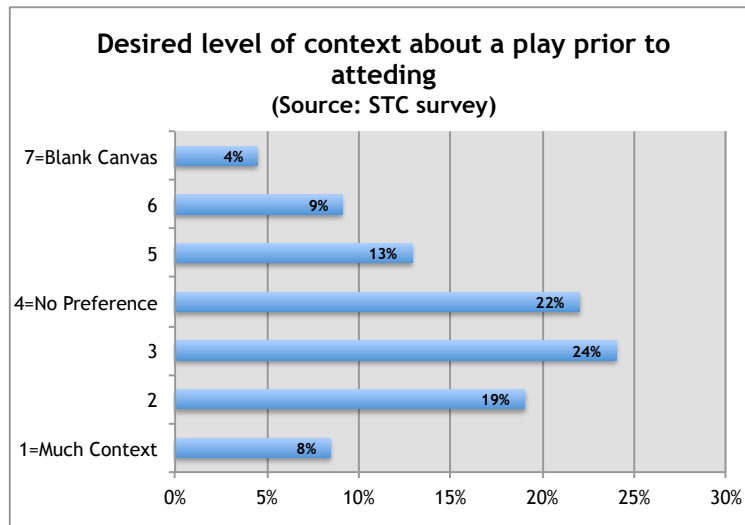
ranging from a low of 13% to a high of 46%. Figures varied widely across the 18 theatres, suggesting different philosophies and practices. On average, audiences for plays with “challenging material” (as defined by the theatres, 18 out of 56 productions) were slightly more likely to do something to prepare (27% vs. 24%). Audiences for the five plays designated as “experimental” prepared at a significantly higher rate (35%), although three of these productions were associated with a single theatre in San Francisco (Cutting Ball Theatre) which had the highest overall rate of audience preparation of all theatres in the sample. It is impossible to know from the available data if audience members for challenging or risky work seek out more contextual information, or if audiences’ acquisition of contextual information is more a reflection of a theatre’s history and practice of providing it.

The STC survey sheds a bit more light on the relationship between preparation and risk tolerance in general. Recall that this was a general audience survey and not a survey of the impacts of specific performances. Respondents were asked:

“Some people like to arrive at the theatre with lots of context on the play they are about to see, while others prefer not to know much about what they are going to see, in order to have an open mind and allow for the element of surprise (i.e., a “blank canvas”). All else being equal, where are you along this continuum?”

Results are presented in Figure 7. On average, most STC patrons fall in the middle of the scale, with a skew towards wanting more context. Further analysis reveals an inverse relationship between risk tolerance and desire for context: those with higher levels of risk tolerance tend to want less context (2% of the variance is explained). Perhaps they are more confident in their ability to negotiate the work without preparatory information, which is abundantly provided by this theatre.

Figure 7: Desired Level of Context (STC Survey)



The CNB survey did not ask about specific pre-performance engagement activities. Further research is necessary to understand relationships between risk and specific

types of pre-performance engagement, especially interactions with playwrights, dramaturgs, and artistic leaders about new work, and whether such engagement mitigates the negative consequences of risk. But given that 24% of CNB respondents, on average, did *anything* to prepare, and given the relatively small proportion of the audience that wants to be involved in the development of new work, it seems that “co-creative” interactions (i.e., artists meeting with audience members about work-in-development) are likely to be small-scale. This does not diminish their importance to either artists or participating “civilians.” But it does suggest that the larger challenge for theatres is providing a small to moderate amount of contextual information to a large portion of the audience, and encouraging or “training” audiences to absorb this information. Theatres know which productions on their season calendars, whether new or classic works, are likely to raise questions in the minds of audience members and therefore require more contextualization and interpretation, and must calibrate their engagement offerings accordingly. If anything, the research suggests that post-performance dialogue is most effective in magnifying impact, especially in regards to challenging or experimental work.

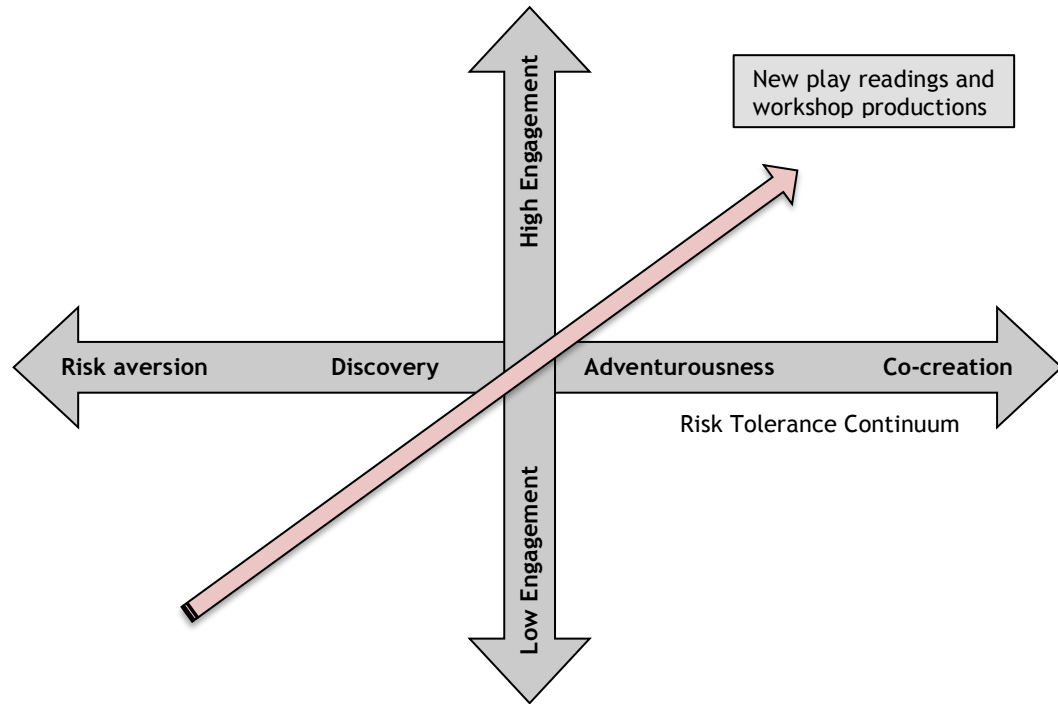
How can audiences be made to feel a part of the forward evolution of the form, beyond the small numbers who wish to enter into a dialogue with artists about new work? Whether or not they realize it, all audiences – by virtue of showing up and engaging with an artistic work – are playing an important role in the evolution of the form. Audience members who participate in the process of developing new work play a special role in this evolution, and can be cultivated and encouraged by theatres and playwrights. But this should not be done at the expense of fostering a sense of adventure and discovery across the larger audience.

Summary

An audience member’s desired level of engagement and his or her level of risk tolerance are two different things, according to this exploratory analysis. While there are subtle relationships between the two, it might be helpful to think of them as two intersecting axes (Figure 8). The research suggests that co-creative activity between creators of new work and “civilians” occurs in the upper right-hand sector of this matrix, where both engagement and risk tolerance are high.

More research is needed to understand how audiences plot against this matrix. If the matrix proves to be useful, then a theory of change is needed to explain how audiences can progress from the lower left-hand quadrant – where both engagement and risk tolerance are low – to the upper right-hand quadrant, where both are high. It must be emphasized that audience members’ preferences for engagement and risk are a natural reflection of their experience with theatre and many other personal characteristics and other factors beyond anyone’s control. People in all quadrants of this matrix can have richly rewarding experiences. While theatres may wish to foster movement from one corner to the other, this should be done without stigmatizing those who prefer to remain where they are, or who believe that art speaks for itself and doesn’t need to be contextualized or otherwise mediated.

Figure 8: Theatre Engagement Matrix



A robust audience engagement program is a good start, but not a theory of change. As audiences arrive at theatres with lower and lower levels of arts education, on average, demand for interpretive assistance is likely to increase. In the orchestra field, for example, research suggests that as many as eight in ten audience members, on average, prefer hearing short introductions from the stage. In opera houses worldwide, supertitles are the norm. Providing high quality contextual information and post-performance forums for those who choose to engage has become a helpful standard of practice in the theatre field. A recent study of ballet audiences, for example, found a strong relationship between knowledge of the form and higher levels of attendance and giving, suggesting that engagement is not just a perk for inquisitive ticket buyers, but a long-term strategy for financial sustainability.

There are limitations to what can be accomplished through conventional, opt-in engagement programs, however, given that three-quarters of the audience is not engaging in *any* pre- or post-performance activities offered by theatres (or at least the activities we measured). There are two frontiers for further development in this area: 1) the nature and quality of the educational content itself, and the involvement of creators in communicating about their work; and 2) the structural approach and distribution channels of educational content and meaning-making. Both require serious re-evaluation. For example, some theatres might seek to fully integrate engagement into the sales process, such that ticket buyers are automatically asked how they prefer to engage, and how and when they'd like to receive advance information.

Audiences can and do engage with theatre and drama more often than when they are in theatres, although theatres seldom curate programs they don't produce. If higher levels of engagement with the form are a key goal, then it seems that theatres would be well advised to consider the larger landscape of theatre and drama in their communities and curate a wider range of activities for their audiences – such as reading plays at home, interacting with playwrights in online forums, or watching drama on television – that will heighten engagement and appreciation for the form.

Proximal Development

Theoretical literature in the psychology field suggests that learning is optimized when learners are challenged – but not too challenged. In other words, the ideal place to learn is just beyond your current abilities – or in the “zone of proximal development.”³ Most likely, Vygotsky's seminal theory applies not only to learning in classroom settings and athletic training, but to learning through art, as well. This would suggest that audiences learn best – and have the most rewarding experiences – when they are challenged within their zone of proximal development. When such alignment occurs, audience members not only learn more, but also feel a sense of accomplishment and validation afterwards.

This has far reaching implications for the field, and may provide a basis for a more robust theory of change for fostering a culture of engagement and adventurousness amongst audiences. On one hand, it suggests that theatres should work to align audiences with artistic work in a way that stretches them, but not too much. This can be accomplished by curating artistic work with the audience in mind, or by curating the audience with the artistic work in mind – such as Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's “[audience design](#)” approach to marketing. This will require a new level of dialogue between theatres and playwrights in order to think together about who is the ideal audience for a new work, and how they might be affected by the work (i.e., moving away from the self-selection marketing model to audience as an “intentional community”).

Subscription packaging complicates this work, in that subscribers buy a basket of risk, not individual programs, and are not always able to self-regulate. Ideally, a theatre will know an individual's appetite for risk, and offer plays and engagement opportunities within the zone. Past purchase behavior provides an indicator of risk tolerance (i.e., coding shows based on risk criteria, and scoring each ticket buyer in the database for risk), but better measures are needed from primary research. This

³ Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky developed the construct of the zone of proximal development over the course of his academic career. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zone_of_proximal_development, which includes a bibliography pointing to a further source literature.

information should be overlaid with engagement preference data, to paint a fuller picture.

On the other hand, aligning artistic work with audiences' interests and learning capacities (or vice versa) is likely to be difficult and costly for most theatres. Calibrating engagement activities to meet individual audience members' needs, then, is perhaps a more realistic goal for the field, although this will take a good deal of research and development. Many theatregoers are masters of other domains such as law and medicine, and therefore have significant learning skills, even though they may be newcomers to theatre. In some communities, live theatre of a challenging nature is simply not available to those who are ready for it. In situations like this, theatres might consider curating live or digital theatre experiences produced by other theatres – as a means of extending the zone of proximal development beyond their own producing work.

Recommendations for Further Research

- Exploratory interviews with attendees of play readings and workshop productions, to better understand motivations, desired benefits, engagement techniques and patterns of fulfillment. This might be coupled with impact assessment surveying to explore the efficacy of different types of audience interactions with playwrights, both live and digital.
- A national study of audience attitudes about risk, involving both qualitative and quantitative aspects, to build a stronger theoretical model of risk, better measurement tools, and to understand how specific engagement practices mitigate risk. This might involve a large-scale, field-wide interviewing event in which theatres across the US interview a cross-section of audience members about risk, using a standard protocol, and report findings to each other through a common website forum. Another aspect of the qualitative work might be post-purchase interviews or focus group discussions with ticket buyers to probe reasons for *not* purchasing specific shows (i.e., what triggers non-purchase behavior). Then, a multi-site online survey could be deployed to collect quantitative data across numerous theatres, again using a standard protocol to allow for cross-site comparison. Results would be available to the field through an interactive online dashboard.
- In combination with the above, an effort should be made to develop and standardize an approach to scoring ticket buyers for risk based on past purchase behaviors, such as the “Audience Climbing Frame” developed by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre as part of its [Audience Builder program](#). This would allow for overlay of survey data with ticketing data in order to investigate the predictive power of self-reported survey data over actual behaviors.
- Research to explore how engagement may or may not serve as a form of donor cultivation, and if donors who engage are likely to give larger amounts of money, or to give for longer periods of time.