

Unitec Research Committee Final Report

LAB: Research Theatre Company (part two) - Creating a Dialogue with the Audience

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2011

Executive Summary

The research project LAB: Research Theatre Company (part two) - Creating a Dialogue with the Audience was designed to investigate the dramaturgical development of the theatre show *Alfonsina* (and the theme of immigration) through audience feedback. The show was performed in four different places/contexts and selected audience members were invited to reflect and to express their reading/understanding of plot, theatre language, social and political questions and the philosophy of the company. The research revealed that all focus groups perceived the dialectics of the immigration experience and its contradictions in different degrees. Our goal was to see how this conversation with the audience could become a further step towards the development of the story and the technical side of the performance. In conclusion, the project was successful in achieving the desired result. The script of *Alfonsina* was adjusted several times as a result of the conversations with the audience; the audience was almost a co-creator in a sense that they were active in participating in the process of developing the show.

Background

This project was unique in its own nature as a platform to give voice to the audience as an active participant in the process of constructing a story. It was important in two ways: First, as a form to democratize the access to the production of cultural goods. The company opened a channel where the audience's reactions are not simply a way to confirm the success of or not of the project, but it was an effective way to make the audience an essential part of the process of developing the show. Second, the company benefited immensely by opening the process of creating the work to multiple voices, interpretations and viewpoints.

Aims and Objectives

The aims and objectives didn't change during the project.

- To create a dialogue with the audience in order to develop a particular theatre language focused on the investigation of social and economic issues.
- To debate aspects of the immigration experience through a particular visual drama language.
- To tour *Alfonsina* in different places and cultural contexts and organise focus groups with audience members after the performances.
- To write articles in peer reviewed journals.

Methodology

I collected data for this research by organizing Focus Group on the day following the performance of *Alfonsina*. The idea was to invite the audience to spend an hour reflecting and answering questions around the contradictions and paradoxes of *Alfonsina*'s actions and choices and how they were affected by the story and

the characters. There were four Focus Groups (Wellington, Dunedin, Auckland and Brazil). Each group had maximum of six people. Each focus group represented a demographic: a group exclusively of South American immigrants in Dunedin, New Zealanders/Pakeha only in Wellington, in Auckland the group was composed of female cleaners and in Brazil it was a group of people who lived overseas and returned to Brazil. This approach was chosen in order to have a wide spectrum of audience's responses (different age, social class, cultural backgrounds, gender). The idea of having a conversation with the audience informed the option of having a focus group instead of questionnaire for example. The focus group was an effective way to let the audience express their thoughts in an open and safe way.

Outcomes/Findings

I achieved the desirable result as I have explained above. The end of the show was restructured as a result of the audience's response. All groups identified a major inconsistency in the script that made the final scenes lose the dramatic energy and didn't contribute to the overall discourse of the play. The end of the story showed Tracy the boss firing the two cleaners after discovering all the problems caused by Alfonsina and Hera (stealing money, buying a fake visa), returns to Alfonsina's apartment in order to help her. The audience refused this idea; they thought it was incoherent and too idealistic for a manager to 'out of nowhere' to become generous and altruistic. The new end presents Tracy arriving at the apartment just to pick up the uniform (not to help Alfonsina) and then she is informed that the Argentinean cleaner has been arrested by the immigration officers and is about to be deported. Tracy is impotent and tormented by guilt and tries to help, but it is too late. This new end made the story much stronger and gave depth to the boss character without sentimentalism.

Conclusions

The project served to extend the process of creating a theatre show involving the community. Their voice became an essential part of the process. The stage (really) became a place of dialogue, instead of a monological relationship where artists present their work without giving the opportunity for a formal response from the public. The audience becomes an active participant and the show is a medium of this conversation. The theatre show assumed a position in the middle of the process, rather than at the end of it. The work is continuously being scrutinized and the audience response echoes in all aspects of the production. The adjustments made in the show are the materialization of the audience's active participation in the making of the story/history. Their response affects the process that will be repeated and presented to another audience. The dialectics of theatre is finally achieved.

Implications

The Unitec Research Funding panel decided to not fund the development of LAB: Research Theatre Company project for 2011. This kind of theatre organization (focused on research) does not match the criteria of external funding in New Zealand. The only way we could carry on with the research was receiving funding from this institution. Research Theatre companies from overseas are also commissioned by hosting institutions because these companies do not operate on production based, but on an ongoing work that takes many years to achieve certain results. The findings of our company represent a completely new territory that no other company has stepped in Aotearoa. The quality of the work was

confirmed by the several reviews of *Alfonsina* and in each of them they recognized the specific approach towards actor training unseen in our country. The existence of a company like LAB is very beneficial in a theatre context like ours; where there is little innovation and investigation in the field of theatre practice. The whole theatre industry benefits from having a company focused on the development of a particular theatre language.

Publications and dissemination

Alfonsina was performed at the UNITEC's Research Symposium, Wellington and Dunedin Fringe festivals, Vertice Brazil – International Women In Theatre Festival (Florianopolis – Brazil) and at the Musgrove Studio in Auckland. I will be submitting an article for a book organized by the Dramaturg's Network (UK) "New dramaturgies – a fresh perspective" edited by Methuen. Deadline for submissions 31st March 2011.

Appendixes

DVD Alfonsina at the Musgrove Studio August 2010

Script of Alfonsina

Photos of Alfonsina in Brazil

Reviews of Alfonsina