

Why do adults bring young people to theatre?

BY JEANNE KLEIN

JEANNE KLEIN is an Associate Professor and Director of Theatre for Young People at the University of Kansas.

Artists and theatre educators have long believed that theatre for young audiences (TYA) establishes a critical theatre-going link between young and future adult audiences. To investigate this link, the Professional Theatre for Young Audiences Network of AATE conducted a nation-wide survey during the 1994-95 season.

Representatives from various companies wanted to know adult ticket-buyers' perceptions of TYA in order to gain additional ideas for advocacy and public relations. They asked their adult patrons one simple question: "Why did you bring your child/student/young person to theatre?"

Out of a mailing to 135 companies, 12 companies from 11 states participated in this project. The responding theatres combined had a total attendance of almost 1.5 million in 1993-94. Their 1994-

95 seasons included more adaptations from children's literature than original plays or titles from the adult repertoire.

Nine of these theatres played mostly to elementary age students (46%), and one company offered high school matinees from its adult repertoire. Most adult audiences were college graduates (54%) with middle or upper middle-class incomes (i.e., 37%, \$41,000 to \$75,000). While school and public audiences were mostly white (64%), respective geographic regions reflected other proportionate ethnic groups (averaging 2% to 13%).

Despite the low return rate of company responses (9%), over 3,300 adults answered the question across 11 theatres, ranging from 40 to 908 adults per company. Public audiences, primarily parents, but including relatives and group supervisors, were questioned about four times more often than teachers or other school personnel. Season subscribers, ranging from 18 to 743 adults, were represented about twice as often as individual or group ticket buyers, ranging from 15 to 165 adults or schools, at eight companies. Two companies reported that women purchase tickets more often than men (e.g., 92%).

Each company included the question in other audience surveys or as separate inserts in their programs and/or in teachers' evaluation forms or study guides. In addition, four companies engaged patrons in casual conversations or brief interviews before and/or after performances, and one company conducted a focus group discussion with an advisory committee of educators at their theatre. Four companies also contacted their state granting agencies, private funders, arts or recreational centers, or schools.

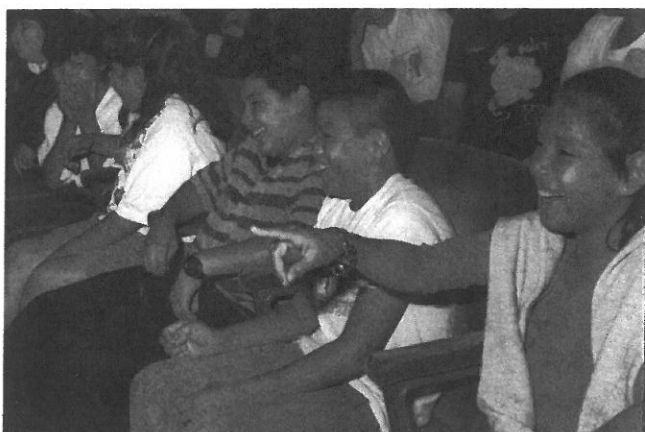
In April 1995, after gathering and synthesizing responses from their local adult audiences during the season, 12 companies returned a list of "the top 15 reasons why adult ticket-buyers and school districts said they brought young people to theatre." Reasons were not necessarily ranked

THE TWELVE COMPANIES THAT PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY

Berkeley Repertory Theatre (CA)
 Children's Theatre of Charlotte (NC)
 Childsplay, Inc. (Tempe, AZ)
 Dallas Children's Theatre (TX)
 Emmy Gifford Children's Theatre (Omaha, NE)
 Fulton Theatre for Young Audiences (Lancaster, PA)
 Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HI)
 Nashville Academy Theatre (TN)
 New York State Theatre Institute (Troy, NY)
 The Open Eye Theatre (Denver, NY)
 Seattle Children's Theatre (WA)
 Stage One: Louisville Children's Theatre (KY)

in order of priority or frequency of responses. Some reasons were direct, anecdotal quotes from respondents themselves, while others appeared to be directors' distillations of adults' ideas. Some companies reported a few repeated concepts, while others distinguished different concepts for each of their 10 to 26 reasons or anecdotes listed.

In asking "Why?" some respondents implied or offered causal reasons ("because"), or identified past determinants that motivated them to bring young people to theatre. Others translated



"Why?" into "What for?" or for what future purpose or intention ("to do"). Some adults positioned themselves as active agents of change, while others explained the psychological or social forces that "drove" them to drive young people to theatre, so to speak. Thus, reasons reflected both past motivations and future intentions.

Keeping all language intact, I categorized each listed reason into similar concepts, as patterns emerged across companies, and labeled reasons as future-oriented actions whenever possible. Naturally, many reasons overlapped with others, but an attempt has been made to separate concepts in order to emphasize and clarify subtle differences in similar responses. Readers are hereby cautioned to resist prioritizing any reason as more important than others.

Not surprisingly, adults' reasons for bringing young people to theatre coincide with the artistic missions of many organizations which produce theatre for young audiences. These attitudes, beliefs, and values confirm how thousands of adult

REASONS FOR BRINGING YOUNG PEOPLE TO THEATRE

- To expose young people to theatre, arts, and culture
- To experience and appreciate live theatre as an alternative to mass media
- To expand and enrich world views of life
- To educate and develop well-rounded people
- To teach and learn specific skills (e.g., self-expression, problem-solving, emotional expression, imagination, creativity, audience behaviors, listening, and critical thinking)
- To bring literature to life as a curricular connection
- To enjoy fun entertainment
- Because adults love theatre from past experiences
- To share quality family time (or group activity)
- To take advantage of a school opportunity
- To inspire young performers and audience critics
- Because the company has a reputation for quality productions
- To see a particular play
- Because public relations are successful
- To create future theatre audiences

patrons share a love and respect for the art of theatre. Their aesthetic sensibilities remind producers to motivate future attendance primarily by creating memorable theatrical experiences, as parents and teachers join together in nurturing the personal, social, and cultural lives of young people. ☺

For a more detailed report of methods and results, including adults' quotes, contact the author.