

AUDIENCE TALKBACKS

This year, we are conducting a post-performance discussion (or “TalkBack”) after each play. The discussion will focus on the issue(s) faced by the characters in the play and their relevance to issues faced by our society today. These talkback discussions are a natural extension of one reason why people go to the theater — curiosity. Many theatergoers are interested in learning, discovering something new. Talkback discussions are designed to increase attendance at the Center of the World Festival, to encourage people to come out for theater and discussion.

These discussions are NOT a process to permit comments about the actors’ performances, the directing style, nor how artfully the topic is presented. They will not include judgmental criticism. There are no “right or wrong” responses, only each person’s individual feelings and thoughts about the TOPIC itself. The audience participation is solely designed to elicit further insights into the TOPIC raised by the playwright. It is social theater discussion, not theatrical venue discussion.

A good talkback discussion will illuminate the substantive issue. These plays are about something related to humankind’s relationship with nature. The plays engage people’s emotions on the most basic level. And a talkback is an opportunity for people to process those emotions and to be heard and to feel some relief of their tension that was initiated by the play’s theme.

Moderated by play’s director and the playwright (or their proxy), the conversation will be approximately 5 minutes. The moderators begin the talkback, making it clear where the conversation is going. The moderators focus first on asking the audience questions, about three questions, with the first one being a thematic question, aiming to engage people’s reactions to a play. At the end, other questions are taken from the audience, with the aim that those questions will open up more of the play, giving an opportunity to consider the content and context of what they have just seen on stage.

Talkback discussions offer a chance not only to engage the audience with the work, but to engage with each other. They provide an opportunity for people to hear someone else. And say, “This person had an experience that resonates with me, so maybe I can have a conversation with them.” Indeed, space and time is built into the evening for people to continue chatting after the entire program is concluded.

A good moderator will keep the conversation on track and moving along — and also maintain objectivity on the questions and allow audience members to hash out what they are trying to ask or what meanings they might be creating. The basic rules of engagement are: be polite, keep your comment or question brief, and don’t interrupt people. In particular, what makes plays interesting are the issues upon which the audience members disagree. However, the moderators do not let the discussion become too heated, as people will leave feeling bad. The moderators will resolve the conflict before ending the discussion.

Sometimes these conflicts arise because the audience member cannot put their finger on what they found difficult to tolerate about the play and this causes their frustration. After all plays are performed, the moderators will hang out afterwards and answer any questions that didn't get answered in the 5-minute TalkBack. The availability of the moderators after the program can give the audience members more time to process their feelings. It also allows more time for those members who want more than a 5-minute discussion. Anything that the moderators can do to make themselves available is a great service to the play and to the audience.

The Center of the World Festival is a social storytelling venue. Social theater also has been called "Theatre for Development" and is a form of theatre that aims to disseminate knowledge, raise awareness, change attitude and modify behavior in regard to issues such as the environment, health, conflict resolution and a wide variety of other societal problems.

Rather than simply promoting the adoption of a particular attitude, social theater creates community consensus through shared experience. Social theatre imaginatively engages its audience to raise awareness and generate discussion about its subject. Its techniques are primarily directed towards holding the attention of the audience, asking them simply to 'look, listen and enjoy', and only secondarily directed towards the promotion of a particular position on the issue(s) raised.

"Impact Assessment" is the term which we used to obtain grant funding for this type of audience engagement. We do not measure just in terms of whether they liked it or not, but in terms of the play's impact on them. If the impact doesn't occur at the time of the exchange between the play and the audience, then the economic, social or civic benefits associated with the play can't happen. This is why the quality of the experience is so important. Audience discussions are shown to increase the quality of the experience. In our grant applications, we argue that investments in artistic and creative processes can pay substantial dividends to individuals, families and the community through this interactive process.

Reporting to grant funders on intrinsic impacts also can help us build community sensitivity to, and support for, the intrinsic value of the Center of the World Festival, with focus on social and not financial outcomes. Audience discussions can help us develop a better understanding of how the plays are received, thus helping us to make future improvement and anticipate our community needs in terms of engagement and interpretive assistance.

Post-play discussions will also serve to interest the audience to complete an on-line survey (set up at BaseCamp Café in Pine Mountain Club) which further satisfies our grant requirements to Kern Board of Trade. In addition to usual tourism questions, the audience member will be asked such questions as: To what extent did you gain new insight or learning? To what extent did the performance cause you to reflect on your own opinions or beliefs?