

## How Theatre Encourages Well-being—and Can Engage a Wider Audience

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## How Theatre Encourages Well-being – and Can Engage a Wider Audience

A recent study of single-ticket buyers and subscribers at a major regional theatre – Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kentucky – focused on measuring quantitatively the psychological benefits of engaging with theatre and gathering qualitatively observations by focus groups. Both confirmed the hypothesis that regular attendance promotes flourishing and meaningful social interaction, psychological stimulation, and positive emotions. The study also affirms that attending theatre contributes to a shared sense of community, this at a time when such community appears starkly diminished in the United States. In addition, focus groups wished that audiences better reflected the demographic diversity outside the auditorium. Evident disparities include urban vs. rural, prosperous vs. not, more education vs. less, black vs. white – reflecting those that splinter national politics. One microcosm of one theatre's audience provokes suggestions to foster a more democratic audience and pluralistic culture that endeavours to cross rather than ignore the divides. Russell Vandenbroucke is Professor of Theatre at the University of Louisville and Director of its Peace, Justice & Conflict Transformation programme. He was previously Artistic Director of Chicago's Northlight Theatre. Suzanne Meeks is Professor and Chair of the Psychological and Brain Sciences Department, University of Louisville. Her research focuses on mental health in later life.

*Key terms:* theatre marketing, flow, American theatre, National Endowment for the Arts.

DIRECTORS AND PRODUCERS routinely listen to the audience while watching the stage as they refine productions. Actors polish the timing of a joke, a bit of business, and the rhythm of repartee by gauging audience responses. This give-and-take, innate to making productions as to experiencing them, is an ineffable joy of a *live* art. After the curtain call, many theatres seek input from single and season ticket buyers through questionnaires, talkbacks, and social media, but such responses usually remain internal to the organization.

As part of a recent study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), 'Psychological Aspects of Theatre Audience Engagement', we surveyed single and season ticket buyers at Actors Theatre of Louisville to measure the psychological benefits of theatre involvement. Qualitative responses from four focus groups augmented the study's quantitative approach. The observations reinforced the hypothesis that regular theatregoing promotes social and emotional experiences that support well-

being, such as social engagement and a sense of belonging throughout life. More unexpected were the number of comments that echo the perspective and language of theatre professionals on, for example, the rewards of taking risks and the reciprocity of the audience–stage relationship. In addition, the implicit understanding by these ticket buyers of what Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls 'flow',<sup>1</sup> a highly-focused mental state during deep immersion in an activity, is surprisingly similar to the experience of artists and other creators.

Focus groups also wished that the audience enveloping them reflected more of the community outside the auditorium. This disparity is comparable with other divisions splintering the culture and body politic on the United States: urban vs. rural, prosperous vs. not, more education vs. less, black vs. white. Although only one microcosm of one regional theatre, these focus groups provoke consideration of the place of performing arts in society, the way they are marketed, and invite applied ideas to foster a more demo-

cratic audience and pluralistic culture that addresses divides in society instead of ignoring them.

Participants often echoed the language of theatre professionals in articulating their experience of theatre. As actors must 'get out of their head' and be 'in the moment', so one focus group member praised productions that 'took you out of your own head'. Another reported that theatre 'takes you out of yourself and into either issues that you've directly addressed or issues that are similar to issues that you've addressed'. Still another noted a deep connection: 'You can see the actors feeding off the audience. You consider yourself part of the whole show. . . . When you start laughing, you see the actors start building on that, and you kind of say, "Hey, that was me helping them out".'

### Furthering Audience–Stage Interaction

These theatregoers cited 'risk' in ways that parallel its backstage meaning. In the context of season planning, say, this encompasses the twin spectres of financial risk and artistic risk. Risk tantalizes artists striving to challenge themselves and 'make it new', as Ezra Pound advised poets.<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, it can lead audiences to tune out or drop away from such challenges. Yet, as Long Wharf Theatre's former artistic director Arvin Brown once observed, audiences are like rubber bands whose elasticity increases every time they stretch, and they never quite return to their starting point.<sup>3</sup>

For these focus groups, risk was an explicit reason for attending theatre: one of life's uncertainties that brought them into the auditorium and sustained them afterwards *even* when particular productions were not satisfying. Each group relished critiquing shows they disliked, though individuals seldom focused on the same production. One group became impatient when it thought it would not have this opportunity. 'There are a lot of plays that we go to and when we walk out,' one patron observed, 'I feel like going out and slitting my wrists. . . . I'm really not happy I saw that play, but it had an effect on me.' Another noted, 'We have seen some real

clunkers, too, and afterwards we sit in the car and we just say "What was that?"' Focus groups sometimes argued among themselves, especially over Shakespeare.

In gathering subjects, the study did not screen for institutional loyalty; its depth and breadth were surprising. Many conveyed their appreciation of long-time Artistic Director Jon Jory although he had left the theatre fifteen years previously. The city's moderate size and small number of arts institutions that are nationally visible may contribute to the civic pride. One woman called herself a newcomer: 'I mean I have only been here since 1996; so [Actors Theatre] was quite established when I came.' Another declined the opportunity to move with her company to North Carolina, 'and one of the reasons we didn't move is because they didn't have good theatre'. Many noted the precise duration of their attachment. A subscriber who boasted that he had been attending since he was eighteen mused that his decades of loyalty should earn him a star in the lobby, which prompted another patron to quip that perhaps he could be buried beneath the stage as well.

Participants showed their long and deep history with the theatre in a variety of ways. A retired English teacher first attended Actors Theatre following a suggestion from *her* English teacher. That occurred when the theatre performed in a converted train station the company used before it left for its current home in 1972. A second explained, 'I am honoured and proud to lend my time, a little bit of talent, a little bit of treasury.' A third anticipated the future: 'I have always thought that when I do not have enough money, I would just volunteer to be an usher.' She had persisted in attending 'through several husbands' and teased that when she travels, strangers ask about Actors Theatre 'more often than bourbon'.

Several mentioned how much they missed the resident acting company, which had ended twenty years before. Reasons could be sophisticated: 'Not being an actor or ever having been on stage or behind the scenes, I really appreciated seeing the skill and the methods that were used to portray

different personages and ideas on stage. . . . The more times I saw the actor in a different role, in a different play, the more I appreciated the acting skill.'

They articulated a commitment to theatre variously. One maintained: 'Theatre is an opportunity to reflect on the human condition. It contributes to a sense of well-being. It adds to your sense of perspective.' Another expressed palpable yearning: 'I keep coming and thinking I will learn something. This will change my opinion; I will be mel-low; I will be flexible.' A third reported:

I go to the theatre for the same reason I like to read. It gives me a different perspective on life. . . . I am interested in human interaction and the plays, by and large, build on that interest and challenge, upset, and reward me. . . . It's good for me. (*Laughing*.) Every once in a while, I have my opinions challenged.

For another: 'I want to be challenged. I want to leave the theatre with something different in my life. I want to experience something that changes me even if it's for a short time.'

### Like Artists, Audiences Experience Flow

Such challenges suggest another overlap between those making art and those experiencing it: flow. Csíkszentmihályi's popular concept applies to a mental state characterized by complete immersion in any activity that creates such joy that time seems suspended.<sup>4</sup> His wanted to understand how people feel deeply happy combined with his curiosity to learn what makes a life worth living. He initially focused on artists and scientists deeply occupied by creative activities even without expecting fame or fortune. He concluded that these gave their lives meaning. In his model, flow occurs when the challenge of a favoured activity that is more demanding than average is met by skills that are, similarly, higher than average.

Actors, directors, and playwrights recognize this with terms like: being 'in a groove', working 'outside time', existing in 'suspended animation', 'experiencing serene clarity'. Creators of all kinds experience the bond between creativity and happiness without

needing or knowing Csíkszentmihályi's concept. So, analogously, do audiences. Artists know the obverse, too: the link between frustrated creativity and unhappiness. So, again, do audiences.

The Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre, begun in 1976, gives Louisville audiences annual opportunities to encounter new voices and sensibilities that, apropos Arvin Brown, expand their ability to meet the next challenge. This conjunction of challenge and skill can produce flow. Focus groups appreciated the whole of Humana, if not every production: one remained committed season after season although he expected to like only two plays out of seven, 'If I am lucky. But I do enjoy hearing what twenty-five- or thirty-year-olds are thinking about and writing about this society in general.' His appreciation of perspectives decades younger than his own is a bracing antidote to ageist stereotypes about the rigidity of older, middle-class audiences.

Several acknowledged a responsibility to help theatre thrive. A long-time subscriber and volunteer testified eloquently to the tether between stage and auditorium:

We become a part of fulfilling somebody's dream. There was a writer that had a dream. There was a director that had a dream. There is a singer that had a dream. When we come together at the theatre, we become a part of making their dream come true and, yes, it does affect me emotionally and psychologically. It makes me feel one with the universe.

### Theatre Enhancing Well-being

Average annual attendance at Actors Theatre is about 140,000. Invitations to participate were emailed to about 16,000 single-ticket buyers and 2,344 subscribers, resulting in 676 completed replies. The study was conceived and led by Suzanne Meeks, a clinical psychology researcher in the Psychology and Brain Sciences Department of the University of Louisville who has been funded by the National Institute of Health throughout her career to study mental health and ageing.

She first subscribed to a regional theatre, Long Wharf, while still in high school, and

has subscribed to Actors Theatre for thirty-two seasons. Habitual theatregoing, combined with her work on well-being in later life, led to two age-related questions: what is lost when older adults cannot keep experiencing theatre; and what is lost if younger generations do not connect to theatre in the same way as long-time audience members? These led to speculation on the psychological benefits of being connected to theatre and then to conceptual models that hint at what those benefits might be.

Meeks and Vandenbroucke happened to see many of the same productions at Long Wharf Theatre and the Yale Repertory Theatre as students, but they did not meet until decades later after Vandenbroucke had served as Literary Manager and Dramaturg of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, Associate Producing Director of the Repertory Theatre of St Louis, and Artistic Director of Northlight Theatre in Chicago. This study blended their distinct but complementary backgrounds.

Quantitative analyses supported the postulate that involvement with theatre has lifelong benefits that lead to positive psychological functioning and satisfaction with life. This is especially so when involvement extends to volunteering and philanthropy. All age groups reported psychological benefits, but age moderated their extent. Thus: 'The relationship between involvement and psychosocial benefit may be particularly strong for younger audience members despite the fact that older adults have more involvement.'<sup>5</sup> All audiences benefit, but younger ones benefit more. The study concludes, 'Attending theatre is a significant component of a life well-lived. . . . Psychosocial benefits contribute to a sense of community and pride of place, connecting individual well-being to community well-being.'<sup>6</sup>

In short, at the very time the United States has a diminished sense of community, the study affirms that attending theatre fosters a sense of shared community. Moreover, involvement with theatre is more important for younger than older patrons in promoting flow, social engagement, and a sense of belonging. This is especially pronounced

when the involvement of younger individuals extends to making donations and volunteering, which contradicted the expectation that older patrons would benefit more from involvement than younger ones since they had encountered theatre longer.

### The Psychology of 'Flourishing'

The study reflects growing interest in identifying characteristics that contribute to a 'life well lived', as described by Corey Keyes,<sup>7</sup> and finds that involvement with a theatre organization can contribute to satisfaction, positive psychological functioning, and happiness. Collectively, these constitute 'flourishing', a psychological term for positive mental health. Theatregoers may enter the auditorium focused on the imminent experience of art and entertainment, but they also benefit psychologically. Theatre impacts lives during performances and long afterwards too.

The study was conceived to understand the effect of theatre on long-time audiences, but it first gathered surveys regardless of a patron's age or frequency of attendance. For the focus groups, however, only those sixty and older were selected. Of 161 individuals interested in continuing after completing the quantitative study, 36 were selected randomly, 23 committed, and 20 attended. They included six men and fourteen women who had completed an average of eighteen years of formal education. Sixteen of the eighteen identified as white, two as Jewish, and one as African-American.

Participants often described the very experiences that had been hypothesized by, for example: articulating deep social bonds formed over years of attending theatre; affirming a strong sense of belonging; and describing emotional and intellectual experiences that indicate focused awareness during performances. Despite being selected randomly, focus group individuals turned out to be heavily involved with Actors Theatre and are not representative of all ticket-buyers. Ten were donors the previous year and five had volunteered. Both factors correlate with well-being.

The focus groups reflect the same population identified for generations as constituting the primary audience for performing arts; in addition to the selected criteria of age, they were wealthier, whiter, more female, and better educated than average Americans. Brecht once remarked acidly, 'It's hard for anybody young to realize why older people go to the theatre. Personally, I think it's because they've nothing else to do.'<sup>8</sup> Whatever this audience's motive in attending, the study confirms that they benefit from doing so and in more ways than can be attributed, simply, to life-long learning – or boredom.

### Shrinking – and Older – Audiences

Because all these variables were statistically controlled in the larger, multigenerational sample – including educational and financial advantages – the finding of psychological benefits stands independent of them: *Theatre engagement correlates with well-being throughout life.*<sup>9</sup>

This conclusion may cheer theatremakers and marketers, but it also prompts two thorny questions. First, why does the NEA report that performing arts attendance has been declining for fifteen years *except* for those 65 and above?<sup>10</sup> The focus groups often sounded like an ideal audience that embraces and understands theatre deeply, but their number, alas, is shrinking. Second, why do those who attend remain so narrow demographically?

Back in 1966, Baumol and Bowen wrote: 'The audience for the arts is made up preponderantly – indeed, almost entirely – of people from the white-collar occupations.'<sup>11</sup> Their focus encompassed the performing arts of theatre, opera, dance, and (classical) music. They reported further: 'The median family income among a typical arts audience is roughly *twice* as high as that for the total urban population.'<sup>12</sup> The Actors Theatre focus groups reported a median annual income range of \$75,000 to \$99,999. For Louisville and nearby counties, the median was just under \$53,000 in 2015, the latest year available.

The work and workers on American stages appear to be more diverse than ever,<sup>13</sup>

but the typical audience does not, like the Globe's, encompass today's equivalent of nobility, groundlings, and everyone in between. Generations of student matinees, school tours, rush seats, Pay What You Will, and free Shakespeare in numerous parks have not much altered the average age, race, educational attainment, or wealth of the audience. Moreover, this striation predates the alarming concentration of wealth in recent decades.

The expansion and geographic decentralization of arts institutions in the United States since the Second World War from a few metropolitan centres is inarguable. The growth of Theatre Communications Group, to cite the example of the national organization representing not-for-profit theatres such as Actors Theatre, reflects this trend. TCG began with fifteen theatres in 1961; today it has nearly 500 member theatres, a remarkable development even if its criteria for inclusion have broadened. This explosion of arts organizations from coast to coast parallels the expansion of higher education across the same period.

Given such dynamic growth, what responsibility do not-for-profit, regional theatres have to serve the breadth of America's population while fostering dynamic audience-stage interactions like those cited by the focus groups? How can audiences better mirror the diversity of our ancestors in the civic theatres of ancient Athens (or Elizabethan London)?

However uncertain the roots of the Greek festivals remain, no one has proposed they were strategies for urban renewal, downtown development, or increased tourism. While Greek audiences included dignitaries with assigned seats near the orchestra, they also extended to the hoi-polloi of slaves and prisoners; civic affairs to behold, consider, *and* enjoy were too significant to be shared with elites alone.

In Louisville, focus groups acknowledged that the audiences they saw did not reflect their society. A long-time subscriber lamented:

It always alarms me how few black people are in the audience. We are in a city that has a reasonable percentage of black people. . . . The same thing is true in New York, it's true in Chicago, it's true

wherever you go. . . . It doesn't seem to be getting any better and I think that's in poor form.

Another observed, 'There's a huge socio-economic barrier to theatre.' A third added, 'I don't want to sit with a bunch of grey-haired old ladies who look like me.' She cited the benefit of an audience diverse in age, gender, and ethnicity: 'It gives me a different perspective on different people and how they react to things.'

A man, also white, echoed her, 'I can depend on having a serious conversation with my wife every time an August Wilson play is performed.' For another person, Wilson provided

the chance to experience things that you would not normally. . . . I mean, I would never experience 1940s Pittsburgh, but in *Seven Guitars* I did and that stimulation of that experience broadens my horizon. Theatre makes you understand in a way that other mediums don't.

A woman concurred immediately: 'Exactly, you can't physically go and do those things, but you can take yourself there by sort of riding on a magic carpet.'

If, as one patron averred, 'the audience is part of my appreciation of the play', that appreciation narrows when the audience does not reflect the entire community. No one preferred an elite audience. These enthusiastic theatregoers experienced no barriers to attending – or had learned through experience to avoid barriers that others perceive – but they cited potential obstacles for others: economics, cultural distance, relevancy, fear of the unknown, and the possibility that new audiences might feel intimidated.

### Changing the Audience Demographic

When one suggested that theatre being seen as 'too highbrow' was a barrier, another confirmed the perception, 'they get this idea that it's a bunch of snobs'. For her, this was not reality: 'You might see somebody in a fur stole and you might see somebody in cut-off blue jeans. . . . I always say you know how artsy-fartsy people are, they can be in anything. . . . Get over it. just come one time.'

Working on a project at the Repertory Theatre of St Louis many years ago, Vandenburg offered comp seats to a collaborator who shared them with his father. He was initially bewildered: 'How do I use them? Where do I go? What do I do? What do I wear?' Theatre professionals forget there are many such fathers, mothers, and children too. Performing arts organizations, in particular, and the culture in general, would benefit from remembering these neighbours when lamenting rows of empty seats. How can they be proactively invited and included? The St Louis father is a bracing reminder of the mystique that can envelop arts institutions and that may be promoted by them too. Having mastered rites and passages of the performing arts, creators and managers forget how strange and unfamiliar these may be to the uninitiated.

What would happen if box offices charged *more* for anyone arriving in a tie or dress? What if they never boasted of sold-out shows and, instead, promised a seat or a place to stand to all-comers? Those denied because of fire laws controlling attendance could be sold half-price seats the next time they are available.

Demographics today that mirror Baumol and Bowen's of fifty years ago suggest how difficult they are to change. They may also suggest a tacit reliance on tried-and-true marketing to urban women, the college educated, and those with 'disposable' income and leisure time. All these traits help define middle- and upper-income 'haves'.

In 'Motivational and Demographic Factors for Performing Arts Attendance across Place and Form', Hager and Winkler address theatre managers and marketing directors:

If their goal is filling seats with the most likely candidates, then they can focus on people of higher socio-economic status. In contrast, if their goal is audience development, then our research suggests that theatre has an untapped market among lower socio-economic households, including those with lower educational attainment and lower household income.<sup>14</sup>

This 'untapped' audience embraces a large part of society, in some places a growing part.

It also reflects a powerful segment of the body politic.

Following the first preview of the first play Vandembroucke produced in Chicago in 1987, he engaged a stranger in a vivid if brief conversation. Australian playwright Ron Elisha's *Two*, getting its American premiere, focuses on a rabbi who survived Auschwitz and the German woman he teaches Hebrew before she emigrates to Palestine on the cusp of Israel's founding. As if these details and the play's 1948 setting were not abstruse enough, the play also uses chess and classical music, both realistically and metaphorically.

A thirty-something man attended with a group of military veterans. Most were being treated for substance abuse at a nearby Medical Center. Asked his response to what he had just seen, he replied immediately, 'Everyone's done somethin' bad in life. I get this play.'

No subsequent comment or review expressed the essence of Elisha's play as deeply or succinctly. Arts institutions are surrounded by people like this former soldier. We have a responsibility to bring them through our open doors and into our empty seats. Doing so deepens our communities and broadens the reach of our art.

### **National Engagement with the Arts?**

One Louisville patron observed:

Going to the theatre is live. It's closed. It's human beings up there. It's not impersonal like a movie, and some people are afraid it will be embarrassing or too close and controversial. I think people are afraid it's going to challenge them too much. Most of us go because we like to be challenged.

And a long-time subscriber asserted:

You can't *not* think critically about what you are watching and experiencing. . . . Why would that character do that? What just happened and why did that happen? And even if you're not happy with what happens, what was the playwright thinking?

Imagine a citizenry that embraces such challenges and that questions every policy or politician purportedly contributing to the

commonweal? Experiencing the performing arts inculcates the habit of listening and watching carefully and thinking critically. These skills can transfer.

For decades the National Endowment for the Arts has balanced a fragile teeter-totter as culture wars swing from one direction to the other whenever a new party assumes the presidency. The latest election continues the pattern even if, for now, attacks on the arts are muted in comparison with other daily assaults.

Viewed through a social lens, the Actors Theatre focus groups mirror prominent fissures in society. They are urban rather than rural, haves rather than have-nots, white more than black (or other people of colour), and beneficiaries of higher education. They represent the elites that critics of arts funding cite each election cycle.<sup>15</sup> Of about ninety esteemed creators Csikszentmihályi interviewed, he writes: 'None of them seems motivated by money and fame. Instead, they are driven by a feeling of responsibility for the common good.'<sup>16</sup> But as much as artists hope to create work that is available to everyone, and that sustains the imagination of everyone, performing arts do not routinely reach everyone, despite the proliferation of state and local arts councils and NEA funding in virtually every Congressional district. The concentration of performing arts institutions in urban areas near the audience and donors that support them reflects the urban-rural split of red-blue election maps.

Acknowledging geographical, economic, and educational divides does not substantiate the hoary division of the arts into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow once postulated by Russell Lynes.<sup>17</sup> The fact that Shakespeare remains the most widely produced playwright around the world year after year, divisions among the focus groups notwithstanding, is not simply because producers do not have to pay him royalties.

The writer and activist Matt Meyer has observed, 'If you are disappointed by who attends a meeting, look at the agenda.'<sup>18</sup> His comment, encompassing both the number of people who show up and the populations



they represent, can be applied to performing arts 'meetings'. What are the agendas of stage productions? Who are they intended for? Who creates them? What concerns and worldview do they represent? Who markets them and who are they marketed to? Recalling the St Louis father mentioned above, who feels both welcome and included? How might performing arts retain high standards on the stage while engaging a wider cross section of citizens off it?

### Some Practical Strategies

What if students facing unemployment upon graduation from MFA programmes were encouraged to be entrepreneurs who create troupes of three or four diverse actors to tour town halls and school 'cafeteria'? They could *work* as artists. Modelling production values on tours under the Equity 'Theatre for Young Audience' contract, with one suitcase for costumes and a backpack for props, their performances would be intended for everyone. Imagine a repertoire of short plays and dramatic monologues – each performance leading to direct audience encounters that would encourage local stories and tellers whose narratives were stimulated by the material just performed.

Although most actors are not inspired interlocutors like Spalding Gray, who created rich, impromptu performances by interviewing *his* audiences, the enduring appeal of bare-stage storytelling is a reminder of humanity's innate desire to sit communally and listen to one another. It occurs around campfires, listening to the radio (as in the storytelling series, *The Moth Radio Hour*), and at performances where attention must be paid. Touring troupes enchant children huddled on linoleum or dirt floors irrespective of their race, age, wealth, or prior experience with 'art'. They are instinctively entranced by the infinite possibilities of 'once upon a time'.

What if such troupes gathered local stories shaped by the interests and issues of a specific community, then 'played back' these in dramatized form at culminating performances? Matthew Shepard's horrifying murder in Wyoming that roused Tectonic Theatre, or

race riots in Brooklyn for Anna Deaverr Smith do not define the boundaries of community stories worth collecting, moulding, then telling and re-telling.

What if an intrepid company applied the techniques of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to a smorgasbord of perennial issues for a community's attention: housing, healthcare, education, meaningful employment, the future of children and grandchildren? Specific topics would be decided by those who gather; doing so would signify their power in embracing their agency. Or the techniques of the Living Newspaper could be revived to create a local weekly focus.

Exceptional community-based work has existed for decades, as exemplified, for example, by Roadside Theatre. Its particular base in the coal country of Kentucky and Virginia has impelled rather than impeded it from engaging across the nation: to collaborate with the Traveling Jewish Theatre of San Francisco, John O'Neal's Junebug Productions of New Orleans, Pregones Theatre in the Bronx, and performers in Zuni Pueblo from New Mexico.

Ideals of 'diversity' usually focus on race and ethnicity, sometimes religion. Expanding 'diversity' to encompass geography, wealth, and world view would foster inclusively democratic discussion across other divides. It might even deepen understanding of the arts and support for them across today's culturally, politically, and psychically divided land.

### Lessons of the Actors Theatre Study

When President Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 six weeks after his 1961 inauguration, he proposed affirmative action to address racial discrimination. In addition to rectifying past prejudice and inequities, affirmative action – now being attacked, yet again – would benefit the body politic by increasing, in theory, equal access for everyone to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Focused efforts to broaden performing arts audiences would similarly benefit the collective. Wider involvement would accom-

plish more than shared aesthetic satisfaction; pragmatically, it could foster social cohesion as a diverse audience becomes one.

The Actors Theatre study confirms that one theatre audience, located in the middle of America, experiences social engagement, a sense of belonging, flow, and general well-being when it gathers regularly to consider, as our progenitors did at the ancient tragedies in the Theatre of Dionysus: 'What is to be done?' *E pluribus unum*, out of many, one.

If performing arts institutions reflect cultural chasms, they can diminish them too. The psychosocial benefits confirmed by this study can contribute to marketing approaches that reach a more economically and geographically diverse audience. When discourse communicates across divides in the auditorium, the very words on stage are recast – as when, for example, Montague and Capulet join hands beside the corpses of Romeo and Juliet, 'poor sacrifices of our enmity'.

Former NEA Chairman Rocco Landesman introduced its punning motto, 'Art Works', during the Great Recession. In the middle of economic uncertainty and high unemployment, it implied, among other meanings, a proletarian function of art. This pragmatic lens has not prevented the cyclic wave of antipathy to arts funding. Americans who do not already experience how theatre correlates with and contributes to a 'life well lived' might attend if they knew the many psychosocial benefits that complement theatre's aesthetic pleasures and entertainment. Through two hours' traffic of our stages they, like this study's participants, could experience how art works, art nourishes, and art engages. Art also heals.

## Notes and References

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16. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 316.
17. Russell Lynes, 'Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow' (1949), reprinted in *The Wilson Quarterly*, I, No. 1 (1976), p. 146–58.
18. This occurred during a discussion about commemorating the upcoming centennial of Bayard Rustin at the annual conference of the Peace and Justice Studies Association, which Meyer had served as founding chair, Tufts University, 21 October 2011.