

APPLYING THE CRITICAL THEORY OF MEDIA TO THEATRE PRODUCTIONS:
AN EXPLORATION IN EUGENE, OR

by

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The critical theory of media analyzes mediums such as music and movies in terms of their economic value, and how well they will sell in the current market. Critical theory as well as other theories of spectacle and representation in media suggest that noncontroversial stories and easy entertainment sell the best. However, theatre has rarely been analyzed in such a way, despite also having to sell tickets and compete in a capitalist market. In order to understand the relationships between economic need and the desire to produce socially active theatre, five different theatre organizations throughout the Eugene community were interviewed. These interviews demonstrated some tension in choosing shows that will sell well versus shows that are perhaps more daring, as well as worries about appropriate representation. Less tension than anticipated, however, was found surrounding sponsorships and other funding. Through this research, theatre organizations and attendees might be more aware of these choices and more open to producing theatre that is more controversial or less well-known.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre has always had the ability to tell stories about people that need to be told, as well as discuss issues of human rights and equality. Like any art, theatre can be political and provocative. It can also be beautiful, funny, entertaining, and much more. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, I have been wondering if theatre venues have chosen plays as a response to the actions and beliefs of the Trump Administration. More generally, does the political climate affect the productions that theatres choose? How do theatre venues choose what plays they produce? Are they concerned with making statements about politics and culture, or simply in continuing their sales and entertainment venues like normal? For my project, I am interested in precisely these questions.

When I came across the critical theory of media in Sociology, I knew this was the framework that I was looking for to analyze these choices. Critical theory analyzes society through a “top-down” approach, looking at choices through the lens of power and money. In media, it considers the need for profit as a factor affecting what is produced and how. Coming back to the question of how plays are chosen, I am interested in the ways that power and economics play a role, and how they might encourage or inhibit the production of socially progressive theatre. Therefore, I decided to delve into this question myself with a case study of five theatres here in Eugene.

For my project, I am limited in time, space, and resources, and I believe it makes sense to limit myself to a geographically small space. Because there are theatres all over the US, my sample size could get very big very quickly. For this reason, I decided to do a case study here in Eugene, and interview five theatres of different sizes and economic

structures. My goal was to discover how theatre venues choose their shows, with a specific emphasis on either economic motives or concern about socially relevant messages or content. I am choosing these five different theatres because they differ in audience size, audience expectation, budgets, and economic needs and motives. Since they have different goals and types of funding, I then analyzed similarities and differences, and how this affects their choice of productions. My project is a case study with only five theatres involved, so while my responses will be a telling exploration, they are not generalizable to all theatres of these types. Ultimately, I hope to bring attention to the conditions that can best drive the creation of theatre that is progressive and provocative.

Research Questions

- How does theatre fit in as a form of media, and how might the critical theory of sociology apply?
- How do concerns about ticket sales and popular entertainment affect, in a conservative or progressive manner, the shows selected by a theatre for production?
- How does the size and type of theatre and the ticket price affect a theatres' willingness to produce what they believe to be socially or politically active theatre?

Hypotheses

- The larger the theatre and the more expensive the tickets, the more concerned the theatre venue will be with donors and sponsors as well as ticket sales and producing entertaining shows that are not very provocative. I believe that this makes sense given that larger theatres have bigger budgets per show – if a show were to not sell well, or lose them customers or donors, it would put the theatre at risk of failure.

- Volunteer-based theatres will be more open to risk, original productions, and socially active theatre. This would be because they can work with a lower budget given that they are not paying actors or crew members. Some volunteer theatres may also have performances that are free or by donation only. If they offend anyone, or their shows have smaller audiences, there are fewer economic consequences. However, they will face limitations in how many shows they can produce and the quality given budget constraints.

- Applied / Prefunded Theatre (theatre groups funded by an organization such as a university, that don't rely on sales) will depend largely on the wishes of the donor, more so than the mission of the theatre performers or participants. This would be because without the donor, no theatre can take place.

Methods

For my project, I conducted interviews with theatre representatives. This included directors, producers, or someone involved with the years' show selection. The interviews were relatively structured and in-depth. There are five theatre organizations that I decided to include in my study: Minority Voices Theatre (volunteer-based), Cottage Theatre (community-based), Oregon Contemporary Theatre (commercial non-profit), University of Oregon's Rehearsals for Life (pre-funded, applied theatre), and The Hult Center (for-profit rental space). All of these are located in Eugene, except Cottage Theatre, which is located in Cottage Grove, about 20 miles South of Eugene. Again, these theatres differ significantly in theatre size, ticket price, and type of funding they receive. I interviewed five company representatives, one from each theatre.

My main interview question was, "How did you select this seasons' shows?" I believed that the answers would likely fall towards a discuss of current political climate, or a discussion about what they believe their audience would enjoy. This would relate to socially progressive theatre and economic motives, respectively (although context is important). I guided them from that main question into sub-questions regarding what they believe are their audience expectations, audience demographics, sponsor expectations, artistic goals, and their own economic needs.

The following is my IRB-approved list of questions to ask the theatre representatives. It should be noted that I didn't necessarily ask each person each question, and I added some of my own follow-up questions as I saw fit.

What is your role at [theatre company]?

What is the process of choosing the season's shows?

What do you think your audience demographics and expectations are?

Why did you choose [show from this season or last season]?

What is a show that got turned down this season for production, and why?

What is your average show budget, and how much of that relies on sales?

Sponsors?

Would you say that your shows and / or your theatre is “progressive”? Why or why not?

Would you say your shows try to respond to the political climate or state of the world?

What types of shows have done well for your theatre, economically? Which haven't?

What are your artistic goals?

What are your community goals?

How willing would your theatre be to produce a debut production?

It should also be noted that all representatives interviewed signed a consent form at their interviews, agreeing to participate and allowing me to record their interviews and use their name and theatre organization name in this thesis. All methods are IRB approved and deemed to be minimal risk. (See appendix for IRB Approval.)

Although I am asking about economic motives, I realize that asking outright how money or donors affect their shows could induce response bias and lead to inaccurate answers. Therefore, I asked questions regarding audience expectations, their view of risk-taking, and their artistic goals, hoping that this would lead me to more information about their motives. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and

then I analyzed them qualitatively for similarities and differences. Through compiling organization information, sponsor information, past productions, and interviews I was able to see patterns that correlate or make sense compared to my questions and hypothesis.

I also supplemented interviews with some research on the different theatre companies and shows through data from their websites, lists of sponsors, and past productions. The purpose of this is to see how they advertise or discuss their own shows. For example, are they advertising their show as an entertaining classic, or as an important piece in our contemporary society?

Theatre Name	Theatre Type	Representative Interviewed	Representative Title
Minority Voices Theatre	Volunteer-Based	Carol Dennis	Co-Founder and Director
Cottage Theatre	Community-Based Non-profit	Susan Goes	Executive Director
Oregon Contemporary Theatre	Commercial non-profit	Craig Willis	Producing Executive Director
Rehearsals for Life	University connected, pre-funded applied theatre	Abigail Leeder	Founder and Director
The Hult Center	For-profit rental space	Theresa Sizemore	General Manager

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Theory

Critical Theory

The critical theory of mass media analyzes media in terms of power and money. It stems from ideas from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who believed that “the class which is ruling the *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force” or, similarly, “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal consequently controls the means of mental production” (Marx, 39, emphasis in original). This means that those in power wish to reproduce the current culture in order to keep themselves in power and, in capitalist societies, gain as much money as possible.

As in accordance with Marx’s critique of power and capitalism, David Grazian in his book *Mix it up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*, says that under the lens of critical theory, “the primary motivation for designing and programming media culture is money -- not creativity, not free expression, not pleasure, and certainly not fun, but the unabashed pursuit of profit” (Grazian, 69). In trying to gain as much profit as possible, media needs to cater to as many people as possible. This means that we are “in a society... in which economic imperatives and pervasive values promote the search for large, common-denominator audiences” (Gross, 405). By common-denominator audiences, we are talking about the minimization of economic risk, and the adherence to what media producers know will sell well.

Grazian analyzes critical theory in terms of movies and music, which I believe is helpful for demonstrating the way that the critical theory of media operates. In terms of movies, "the need for blockbusters encourages movie studios to invest heavily in films with a built-in audience and promotional apparatus, particularly sequels, prequels, remakes, and spinoffs of previously successful entertainment properties" (Grazian, 124). When one looks at the best-selling movies of the 2010s, sequels and movies based on books dominate the list. This includes likely familiar names such as *The Hunger Games* Trilogy, the *Marvel* superhero Franchise, and the continuation of the *Star Wars* Series, just to name a few. What sells the best, according to media analysts, is based on "a predictable, low-risk formula for engineering a blockbuster smash: Instant brand recognition and popularity, youth appeal, expensive computer-generated graphics, dumbed-down dialogue, and pyrotechnics" (Grazian, 124). It is much more difficult to pitch something new and untried; "while determining consumption it [the industry] excludes the untried as a risk. The movie-makers distrust any manuscript which is not backed by a bestseller" (Horkeimer, 80). This shows the ways in which the desire for profit drives what is chosen to be produced in the first place, and ideas that are new or may only appeal to a small portion of people will be rejected from the start.

Music, according to Grazian, works in a similar fashion. The music industry also wishes to minimize risk and produce what they know will sell or become a top-hit. He says that "the [music] industry has transformed itself into an engine for manufacturing catchy pop music hits. Forget risk -- nothing is left to chance" (Grazian, 127). Many songs include a similar beat and tone and are sung by the same already-popular artists. In fact, many are actually written by the same person: "From 1999- 2016 Max Martin

wrote no less than 22 No. 1 hit songs" for Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, The Weeknd, and more (Grazian, 127). While it seems like we are getting authentic variety, the truth is that much of it is not; it is catered to exactly what mass media knows will sell the best.

What is most important to underline here is the minimization of risk and the need to appeal to the largest audience possible. Notably, "in order to avoid offending any significant portion of their necessarily vast and varied audience, the media have been forced to show only attitudes as were already virtually universally acceptable" (Goodlad, 68). All of this supports the proposal that media must adhere to a conservative population. The use of the term conservative here does not mean politically right-leaning, but rather attempting to adhere to the largest population possible without being controversial on either side of the spectrum. Ultimately, media under critical theory is known to minimize risk to cater to the largest audience possible, offend as few people as possible, and therefore maximize profit by continuing to produce what has done well in the past. While Grazian and others have shown this to be the case with movies and music, I am interested in exploring whether these same types of values exist in theatre, and whether the critical theory of media is useful in looking at what is produced.

Spectacle

Another important topic in media theory, related but somewhat different from critical theory, is the need for spectacle. It is mentioned above that movie producers are aware of the popularity of pyrotechnics, action, and expensive graphics in their films. In media theory, the need for spectacle takes a darker turn, and is seen as a distraction

from life: “Amusement under late capitalism... is sought after as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again...No independent thinking must be expected from the audience ... any logical connection calling for mental effort is painstakingly avoided" (Horkheimer, 82). It seems that more often, people these days are looking for entertainment that is easy to digest and distract them from the rest of life. This is also supported by the movie industry’s mention of “dumbed-down dialogue” and “expensive pyrotechnics” as elements that help a movie sell well. In connecting this to theatre, I am interested in whether comedies or spectacle-heavy musicals sell better or are more popular than shows that might make a person think deeply about our society.

In his famous work, “The Commodity as Spectacle,” Guy Debord connects spectacle back to Marxist ideas and representing the ideals of the ruling class. He asserts that, “The language of the spectacle consists of *signs* of the ruling production, which at the same time are the ultimate goal of this production” (Debord, 140). It is also meant to keep people calm and accepting of their current life because, “the spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive” and shows us that “that which appears is good, and that which is good appears.” (Debord, 141). This again shows that spectacle and entertainment can be used as a distraction from life and may be more appealing to a mass audience than a performance that makes a person think more about societal issues.

Representation

Representation of people is another component important to emphasize as both related to and distinct from critical theory. The involvement of minorities, people of color, or different sexualities might be considered high risk in certain communities or among certain audiences. In trying to cater to the widest audience possible, mass media may not wish to involve themselves in debates surrounding different types of people. There are people that "by their very existence a presumed threat to the 'natural' ... order of things, and thus they are inherently problematic and controversial for the mass media" (Gross, 405). As discussed above in relation to Marx, the media is also trying to reproduce mass cultural and its norms, and "provide the chief common ground among the different groups that make up a heterogenous national community" (Gross, 406). Stories about minorities may not adhere to mass cultural norms, but rather show stories about defying norms or being willing to be different. This may upset current norms or be controversial to those who wish to keep the status quo.

When minorities are included in media, the other question is whether they are represented accurately, or whether they are confined to harmful stereotypes and tropes. If we suppose that mass media is trying to maintain the current status quo, then, "When groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda" (Gross, 406). This would mean that they are not represented accurately by the media, but rather by harmful tropes or stereotypes. This can be controversial on both sides, upsetting more conservative people by including minorities, while upsetting minorities due to their inaccurate representation.

All of this makes media written by or for minorities particularly important, and something that is not uncommon today in our culture. As Gross says, "There have always been minority media in the United States; various immigrant groups supported newspapers, books, theater and occasionally movies in the native languages" (Gross, 419). This, however, is often perhaps media groups that state their purpose as minority representation, rather than general organizations that go out of their way to include people of different religions, sexualities, ethnicities, etc.

There is a theory in social psychology called the "Mere Exposure Effect," in which people like something more after they have been exposed to it. This can happen even unconsciously and has shown to be effective in everything from finding people more attractive after seeing them to finding products better after hearing an advertisement (Mere Exposure). There is also the theory that this can work for groups of people that a person might be unfamiliar with. While a person might be uncomfortable or even afraid of a type of person that they have not interacted with, putting a face on it can lead to more familiarity and ultimately liking them more. Theatre can have an important role in building this type of familiarity and empathy when minorities are present onstage.

Theatre Organizations

Minority Voices Theatre

Minority Voices Theatre is a theatre project started in Eugene by community members Carol Dennis and Stanley Coleman. According to Dennis,

“The purpose of Minority Voices Theatre is to do staged readings of those plays so that we can develop the bench of actors and at the same time be able to present the stories that people don’t get to see. My sincere belief is that theatre can create a sense of belonging, but only if you get to see yourself there” (Dennis).

Since their founding in 2017, they have done several staged readings, including *Having our Say*, *The Delaney Sister’s first 100 years*, which is about the history of black women in the United States, and *Now I am Your Neighbor*, written in Eugene and telling the stories of immigrants in Lane County. Most recently, they performed *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World*, a play about an Egyptian immigrant and what it means to leave your culture behind. All of their plays tell stories of underrepresented people in our community. They also cast people that represent these populations as best as they are able within the Eugene community.

In terms of economic structure, Dennis says that Minority Voices “was created to be a theatre project, not a theatre company” (Dennis). More recently, Minority Voices Theatre became a project of the Very Little Theatre, a community theatre here in Eugene. This means that they can adopt the non-profit status of the Very Little Theatre, but are not a non-profit or a company in themselves. For most of their shows, including *Now I am your Neighbor*, they did not sell tickets, but took donations only. Dennis said that “the idea is that it will always be sliding scale, or suggested donation at the door, no one turned away for lack of funds” (Dennis).

Cottage Theatre

Cottage Theatre is a non-profit community theatre located in Cottage Grove, Oregon, about 25 minutes south of Eugene. It is not uncommon for the Eugene theatre

community to participate in their shows, and so I thought it valuable to include in my study even though it is not actually in Eugene. All of their “artistic personnel” are volunteers, including everyone from actors to directors to ushers. Their only paid staff are the artistic director and box-office and house managers. They state their core mission to be “engaging and enriching our community through the magic of live theatre” (Mission). They put on 6 performances a year, generally half plays and half musicals. Their ticket price is generally \$25 for adults, with a significant amount of people also purchasing season tickets.

Oregon Contemporary Theatre

Their mission, according to their website, is that Oregon Contemporary Theatre “creates bold entertainment, challenges expectation, inspires curiosity, encourages dialogue and supports positive change. We believe theatre can transform audiences, students, artists, our community and the world around us” (AboutOCT). They produce 6 shows a year. They are registered as a non-profit, but have smaller cast sizes than other theatres, and they pay their actors, directors, and other people involved in the shows; they are the only theatre represented here to do this. Their tickets generally cost between \$30-\$40 for adults.

Rehearsals for Life

Rehearsals for Life is an applied theatre project at the University of Oregon, led by Abigail Leeder. It is a mix of several applied theatre styles, including autobiographical theatre, playback theatre, and theatre of the oppressed. The performers

are all students, who get a stipend of \$500 a term for their time in rehearsals and performances. As part of the University of Oregon's diversity action plan, their department is pre-funded by the department of dean of students. They regularly perform for departments and meetings around campus. In their workshops, the actors tell personal stories, either on their own or through skits or dialogues. As it is applied theatre, the audience is then invited to intervene and become an ally; "in this way, audience members who may not easily identify with the lived experiences of the storytellers begin to understand, empathize with, and perhaps even begin to desire to act in solidarity with the people whose stories they have just witnessed" (Fox). It also gives the audience skills that they might use to be an ally and intervene in situations in the future. According to an article out of Johns Hopkins, Rehearsals for Life "has become a critical player in campus efforts to reduce bias and discrimination within the university community and has been recognized nationally as a model for diversity education on college campuses" (Fox). Rehearsals for Life also is responsible for putting on a summer play, called "It Can't be Rape" that is required for all campus Freshman during their orientation. This play discusses issues of sexual assault, as well as the university rules surrounding alcohol and what to do if a dangerous situation arises in or out of residence halls (UO).

The Hult Center

The Hult Center is a for-profit theatre that is a rental space for other programs in Eugene as well as touring shows. They have a theatre that seats 2400, and one that seats 500. They rent the space to touring Broadway groups and as a concert space to

musicians and comedians, as well as to local companies such Eugene Ballet. While they do “present” some shows that they pull in for their season, they depend much more on the producers of the individual shows in terms of what they produce, how much the tickets will be, and other factors. The Hult Center works to make sure that the show will fit well in their space and in this audience, and advises them about prices and space use, but is not actively making decisions about productions (Sizemore).

ANALYSIS: INTERVIEW SYNTHESIS

In support of my hypotheses:

In certain cases, my interviewees said things that seemed to directly echo my hypotheses. Cottage Theatre was perhaps the most in tune to their economic interests and dependent on the continuation of ticket holders and ticket sales. They are also aware of what shows sell the best and continue to do those that they knew were well known and generated the most revenue from tickets. In her interview, Susan Goes said,

Traditionally, we have typically programmed tried and true shows, because we have experienced that ticket sales are a huge component of our budget, and lots of times a not sophisticated audience is attracted to shows that they've heard of before. So in general when we program a season, we try to make sure we have at least a few anchor shows that Joe-average-person-on-the-street will have heard of, because we know that helps entice people to come... we keep statistics on what kind of shows sell how well, and musicals are way at the top, and then comedies, and then dramas, and then Shakespeare... We sell about half of our tickets on season tickets. And so our season ticket holders are extremely important to us... because they are providing a very important part of our financial cushion for the theatre. (Goes).

These quotes show a need to not upset a core audience, and to stick to shows that will sell well because people are familiar with them and because they are fun and entertaining. This holds up when one looks at their show production history on their website, which includes all their shows since 1980. They have done *The Wizard of Oz* three times. They have done several shows twice, including *The Sound of Music*, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Oliver!*, and *You Can't Take it With You*. These are all musicals or comedies, but also have high name recognition.

This would suggest that shows are being chosen based on what sells well in the community.

Elements that make a show provocative, in their opinion, include language, violence, and nudity. For example, Goes said that,

It's one thing to do nudity if you have a proscenium stage and there's a little bit of a distance between audience and actor. And when I saw *Equus* on stage before it was in that kind of setting. In our case, with the audience on three sides, and the front row right there, and the fact that this is a community theater, so that the people on stage and the person who's naked might be serving you dinner at the restaurant next week or you know, your teacher at the high school – that just feels a little awkward to us here in this context (Goes).

Oregon Contemporary Theatre was also aware of the same elements in terms of what brings in an audience, though with a bit less concern generally. Craig Willis said that,

As of now, our top selling show of all time is *Fun Home* [a musical] ... a bigger surprise probably is that our second biggest selling show of all time – second or third – is a play called *Who am I this Time?* And it's a compilation of three Kurt Vonnegut short stories into kind of three one-act plays...I mean – there was Kurt Vonnegut, so there's a certain audience there... typically comedies are going to sell more strongly, plays – the things that people tell us make them buy tickets are a playwright that they know, a title that they know, an actor or director that they know, those can all be influences. If it was a Tony Award Winner or a Pulitzer Prize winner, those can be influences.

This also holds up in their production history. Most of the shows that they have done have won awards in the past and are advertised as such in the description on their website. Here are just a few examples, though there are much more:

"*Successful Strategies* is a brand new comedy by two-time Oregon Book Award-winning playwright Andrea Stolowitz."

“Nominated for six Tony Awards, *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike* is one of the most lauded and beloved Broadway plays of recent years.”

“*Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* premiered on Broadway in 1962 and went on to win the Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Play.”

“*GOD OF CARNAGE* took Broadway by storm, taking home the 2009 Tony Award for Best Play!”

“*Buried Child* has been universally acclaimed as a work of extraordinary vision and force. In 1979, the play won the first Pulitzer Prize ever awarded to a work premiering off-Broadway.” (About OCT)

All of these statements included in their advertisement of a play shows, as admitted in the interview, the need to produce shows with name recognition, though to a more sophisticated theatre audience than Cottage Theatre is catering to. This would suggest that Oregon Contemporary Theatre is also catering to the need to sell tickets, although it is also possible that these shows are award-winning because they are high-quality and / or socially relevant.

The Hult Center is also aware of the popularity of comedies, as well as well-known shows:

If you have big commercial acts that are fairly popular, they’re going to roll in here and sell a lot of tickets, if it’s comedy, comedy generally sells a lot of tickets. Big rock shows sell a lot of tickets. Famed names sell a lot of tickets. On the other side, we have our local companies that are consistent, they are consistent in their tickets and their numbers (Sizemore).

These statements all backed up my hypotheses in terms of the need for spectacle and entertainment that does not make the audience think too hard, as well as the need to

cater to an expected audience and not upset them or alienate them because of awareness of the financial risks of doing so.

Some theatres also had concerns over sponsors and what content they would be willing to support. For Cottage Theatre, they had a sponsor actually decline to support a show because of its content. Goes reported that,

[The show was] *The Crucible*. And I won't name names, but we had a sponsor who just felt that that was too dark, or felt that their company had some clients who were conservative... this sponsor sort of felt like 'no, that's not quite the image that I want to portray in the community. It might rub some of my elderly clients the wrong way.' (Goes).

In this case, they were able to simply find another sponsor for the show. However, they also had a show in which they could not find a sponsor at all:

Assassins, none of our regular sponsors would do. But we get an annual operating support grant from the Oregon Arts Commission that's just general operating support. And I think that in absence of a sponsor we just decided that they would sponsor that one (Goes).

This is interesting because they were able to do the show regardless of not being able to find a corporate sponsor. However, if they had not gotten this kind of general money, we might speculate that the show would have had issues and may not have been produced. This shows that money can indeed have an impact on show content.

While Oregon Contemporary Theatre has never had a sponsor decline a show, they are aware of this corporate image and finding the right sponsor for a show.

According to Willis,

we're pretty good at choosing shows that we think they [sponsors] will like to have associated with their business, and that they will enjoy. They are actually people that attend everything we do, but we are sensitive that their employees, and or other people that they might want to bring to a show... So, we probably will put their sponsorship towards one of the more broadly palatable shows of the season.

His use of the word "broadly palatable" is interesting and echoes my use of the terms "noncontroversial" or "conservative." This demonstrates that there is an awareness that corporate sponsors have concern about image, and that they may be unwilling to sponsor shows that might offend their clients or employees. Should a theatre operate in such a way that each show needs a sponsor, this could work in a way in which corporate sponsors could eliminate the possibility of certain shows.

In opposition to my hypotheses:

On the other side, the theatre representatives also said things that directly contradicted my theses, which are important for me to include. This includes people being fine with being more progressive, especially people like boards of directors or those overseeing departments. These people were more progressive than I would have originally thought given my research.

For example, as briefly mentioned, Minority Voices Theatre has become a "project" of another Eugene theatre called the Very Little Theatre. They have an involved board of directors and are the oldest theatre here in Eugene. I was interested in

whether the theatre had problems with some of Minority Voices Theatre's shows, morals, or the people they represented. On this subject, Dennis said:

In the last few years, the Very Little Theater has really seemed to make a commitment to getting outside of their comfort zone regarding plays that represent folks that are not in the dominant culture. And after a year of Minority Voices Theater, even less than a year – and Stanley [Coleman] and I are both members there... there was not a dissenting voice in the board when we presented to them that maybe Minority Voices could be a project of the Very Little Theater... And people I think on both sides of the political spectrum are pretty excited (Dennis).

In another contradiction to my thesis, Willis said that he forgot to be worried about warning people of language and sensitive material. This is interesting in thinking about the audience more as an afterthought when producing a show. He said that,

Fifteen years ago, I think I was way more sensitive to language in the plays we're choosing, and the audience was more sensitive. Now I have to remind myself about the need to warn people, because I don't think about it, pretty much. There's so much theatre that has language or subject matter that it would be hard to be a contemporary theater that's not pushing boundaries (Willis).

Part of my hypothesis also included the idea that a pre-funded theatre program would have to answer directly and follow the wishes of those above them and providing them funding. Leeder seemed to dislike the suggestion of this, saying outright, "I mean they [the office of the dean of students, which funds the program] definitely have oversight, but they've never told me not to do anything" (Leeder).

The Hult Center, the most expensive theatre organization on my list, actually produced what might be the most obvious provocative show: they hosted *The Naked Magicians* in 2017. The Register Guard, a Eugene publication, advertised it as "18+ only. Includes coarse language, sexual references and nudity... get ready to have some

fun!” This show seems to include a lot of risk, although given that the name is so explicit, people should know what they are getting into.

These statements all showed venues having less of a concern for provocative material, but rather being able to produce what they like or are interested in.

Effects of Political Climate

Minority Voices Theatre was definitely a response to outside political situations, namely, the election of Donald Trump in November 2016. Dennis said that,

It was in direct response. The idea came before, to just really build the bench and get more stories out there, and then after the election it was, ‘there’s no time to wait because too many people are being hurt... as a matter of fact, I think it was the day after the election, I got on the Oregon Secretary of State’s website and I registered the name Minority Voices Theatre, as sole proprietorship, and I got in touch with Stanley [Coleman] and I said, ‘let’s do it now’ (Dennis).

As mentioned, their shows often deal with communities that are currently not being represented as much in the media, such as immigrants or lesbians, but may also be under attack in national politics.

The other theatres are less explicitly socially active, though they believe it does seem to come out at times. Goes and Willis said very similar statements in their interviews about being socially active and responding to current politics. Goes said,

We’re choosing them [the plays] about a year and a half before they happen. But that committee of human beings, what we like and don’t like is obviously impacted by our taste in what’s going on in the world. So, I think even though it’s not necessarily a conscious effort ‘let’s choose plays that feel relevant to our times and social issues’ I think that’s in there a little bit unconsciously... But we also haven’t shied away from occasionally doing things that are more controversial.

She continued to say that,

What's interesting about this theater community is that while we don't deliberately seek out or try to program work that socially hard-hitting or whatever, on the edges, when we do that, in the natural course of what we do, there's a fair amount of pride in that (Goes).

Willis, similarly, said that,

Sometimes there are things that happen that are, you couldn't predict when you're choosing the season, because right now I'm in the midst of starting to pull together a season that will start in September of next year and go until the following year. And you just don't know what's going to happen in the world between now and then (Willis).

Willis went on to describe one of these situations:

It just so happened that right before that show, not too long before that show started we had the killings in Missouri, and then in Baltimore, of young black men and kind of black lives matter movement got really going. And we couldn't have predicted that.... We were choosing the shows because we felt it's important for us to be addressing issues of diversity of all kinds in the work that we do... But I couldn't have known when we chose it the series of events that would be going on, that spoke very directly to elements of the play (Willis).

These examples go to show the logistical difficulty of responding to outside situations, given how far ahead the season is chosen. However, it seems that they are at least choosing shows with the potential to be socially relevant, or that are dealing with social issues that are more broad and may relate to issues in the past or future.

Rehearsals for Life has a different situation in which to navigate how their outside situations affect them. Part of this is the more improvised nature of the work, and also how the members of the group feel about the political climate. Leeder says that

when creating their work, “We will just all get together and start shooting out ideas and brainstorming together how to write the scenes based on their own experiences and what we’re being asked for from the department, and how we think the scene might flow” (Leeder).

When I asked whether the election of Donald Trump had had an impact on their work, she replied,

I feel like a lot of our scenarios used to be a lot subtler, based on just micro-aggressions, and now people feel emboldened to be more aggressive and more outwardly racist and sexist and homophobic and so some of the work that we’re doing is encouraging people to intervene in blatant acts of oppression. At the same time, because of the current political situation, and things like the stabbings a couple of years ago on the Max, that recognizing that asking people to intervene in situations is actually dangerous. And so, we need to be attuned to the fact that we are encouraging people to do whatever they feel comfortable doing, and not telling people to take risks that they shouldn’t be taking (Leeder).

In terms of whether they have given more diversity workshops since the election, she replied that, “the diversity action plan that the university has taken on, different departments are having to talk about what they’re doing to create a more inclusive environment, so we have more people requesting workshops because of that” (Leeder).

In other words, more workshops are being done because the University is addressing diversity and inclusion more widely, but departments themselves may not have requested them on their own without the campus-wide initiative.

Therefore, while their work does in some ways deal closely with current politics and situations, there are logistical elements here as well that give some separation between the news and the workshops they are working on.

Logistical Motives

Many of the reasons theatres chose to do shows, however, were logistics regarding neither money nor politics. This was outside my thesis, and something I hadn't considered too deeply. These logistical reasons included balancing a season, getting rights, considering cast length and show size, and more. For example, as Goes from Cottage theatre said,

In an average year we get anywhere from 25-35 shows submitted. And what we want to come out with at the other end is a balanced season, in our case we typically program half plays and half musicals, so we're looking for that kind of balance; we don't want to have a year of nothing but heavy drama, or nothing but light comedies, so we're trying to balance that. We're also looking at, are there roles for men, women, and children, and sort of looking at cast size numbers. So, all of those very pragmatic considerations tend to drive our process, after addressing the initial questions of, do we like to script? And is this a story that seems like it's worth telling? (Goes).

Craig Willis from Oregon Contemporary Theatre had similar thoughts about the process. For example,

Sometimes its availability of the rights for a show, and that can be very surprisingly difficult when you're doing new work, because sometimes agents are hard to pin down... usually we're trying to find a balance of genres, and we're also trying to make sure we can comfortably accommodate the needs of the show with our production facility and with our available talent, both in terms of the design team, the director, and then the acting pool (Willis).

He also added, later on:

You know the challenge for community theatres is that typically community theatres are wanting to do works with larger numbers of characters, like colleges also, colleges have the same problem. Professional theatres can't do works with large numbers of characters because the costs become too prohibitive, both in terms of paying actors

and designers, costumes, all of it.... most professional plays these days have between two and six characters (Willis).

While I noted that Cottage Theatre prefers musicals because they sell best and are easily recognizable, Oregon Contemporary Theatre does not prefer them, mainly for these logistical reasons, saying,

Musicals, yes, they generate a lot of revenue, but they also have a lot of costs. Because we also prefer, I prefer to do musicals with live music, so then you're paying musicians, you have to have a very talented musical director. For us the space is not ideally suited, it's hard to get a good balance in the space, because there's not a pit, there's not a place to put musicians that isn't in the same space as the actors.

Sizemore from the Hult Center had slightly different criteria because of the nature of renting, but said that they are mainly concerned with the experience of the person renting the space, rather than economic or social concerns. She said,

Our criteria isn't about the show necessarily, often about the production because we try to stay out of the art form. It's really about the experience of the promoter, who's producing and when we're looking at what they're doing and... actually realizing the experience of the person coming in, sometimes we'll advise them to start someplace else smaller. If they have experience coming in and they've sold the show and they've done these things, then that's a different program altogether (Sizemore).

This all seemed important to note, because in my hypotheses I was looking at how theatres choose the shows they do in regard to political atmosphere and economic motives. These quotes are all outside of my hypothesis, but show that there is much more to consider about the space you're performing in, who is directing and producing, getting the rights, how many actors you can accommodate, and more. Sometimes, a play that you want to put on is not feasible for many of these reasons.

Representation

There in an interesting conversation happening the interviews between Dennis and Willis, which may represent a wider thought processes in our community. In general, Dennis believes in casting diverse people in her shows, and using people from the community, even if they have never acted before. She believes that there is the cast and there is the audience, as well, for shows that are more diversely cast, although perhaps not as well-acted. On the other hand, Willis does not believe that Eugene has diverse and talented enough actors for the roles he is looking for, causing him to turn down a show or bring someone in from out of town to play these roles.

Dennis said,

I got really sort of frustrated with the theatres in town saying they can't do plays that represent minority communities because number one they don't have the actors, and number two, there's no audience. The purpose of Minority Voices Theatre is to do staged readings of those plays so that we can develop the bench of actors and at the same time be able to present the stories that people don't get to see... [When we performed] *Now I am your Neighbor* for the three shows at the Very Little Theatre, we were turning away more than 100 people each time (Dennis).

It seems that Willis does not believe we have the actors in our community. He said that,

Somebody had come to me with a show a few years ago that, I like the show, it just so happens that it didn't fit with what we're doing in our season. But also, I didn't think we, you know our acting pool could pull it off successfully. And we didn't have the resources at that point to bring in the outside talent that would have been needed. Because it was a show which required two black actors.

It's getting easier somewhat for us to be a little more diverse because as we've grown, we've definitely used some of our resources to draw in actors from outside the community so that we can cast things that maybe we couldn't cast if we were only restricted to the local community (Willis).

In terms of my questions and hypothesis, it seems possible that this sense of needing “real” talent may come from the fact that Oregon Contemporary Theatre sells more tickets, and more expensive tickets, and is expected to be more professional because of it. They also pay their actors. Minority Voices, on the other hand, performs staged readings, does not pay actors, and does not always require their audiences to pay for the show. This means they have more leeway to put on theatre that uses less talented or experienced actors without audience criticism.

Eugene as Progressive

In my hypotheses I speculated about theatres being “conservative” and not wanting to disrupt the status quo with more controversial plays. I was originally thinking about this in terms of representing minorities or generally being too liberal in message. I found, however, that often plays were rejected for being too offensive or outdated from the other direction, meaning that they were too old-fashioned.

For example, Dennis discussed how Minority Voices parent theatre, the Very Little Theatre, did not want to put on the play *THE BOYS IN THE BAND*. She said,

there was some controversy – not controversy but debate – as to whether or not it should happen at the Very Little Theatre, because of how ugly it presents the gay community. The director said to me, ‘you know, it’s interesting – 20 years ago, The Very Little Theatre would’ve never even considered doing a gay play, and now the Very Little Theatre is concerned that they’re reflecting on the gay community poorly.’ And that’s a huge, a huge journey (Dennis).

Goes also said something similar, about the classic musical *Carousel*:

there's sort of some spousal abuse and some other things that, you know, in the 50s when *Carousel* came out people didn't think twice about, but it wouldn't play well with a modern audience. And so, there are sometimes shows like that that we say, 'eh, we don't want to touch that one' (Goes).

Again, these are interesting statements because they show that theatres are worried about offending their liberal audience, or about representing people fairly, and staying away from conservative or traditional ways of viewing people and relationships. This is in opposition to much of my research regarding representation.

Willis had a similar experience, regarding the authenticity of a play about the black community, saying,

What was offensive to me about it was I thought, this is a play that needs to be written but I want to hear it from the perspective of a black writer. And I didn't even know that the writer was white when I was listening to it. I sensed that they were. And there were lots of elements about it that didn't ring true to what I think that experience is... I felt like it was being dealt with totally from a perspective of how a white person views what's going on. And it didn't ring of authenticity to me. And I found it offensive (Willis).

This all goes to show how they were worried not about being too socially active, but rather about not being socially active enough, or representing people in a way that is not accurate. This was a surprising find based on my hypothesis, although perhaps consistent with the Eugene community as a whole.

Conclusions

Hypothesis: The larger the theatre and the more expensive the tickets, the more concerned the theatre venue will be with donors and sponsors as well as ticket sales and producing entertaining shows that are not very provocative. I believe that this makes sense given that larger theatres have bigger budgets per show – if a show were to not sell well, or lose them customers or donors, it would put the theatre at risk of failure.

Outcome: This was upheld in terms of concerned with selling tickets, in particular with Oregon Contemporary Theatre and Cottage Theatre. However, this doesn't necessarily mean not being provocative as much as using entertaining shows that have name recognition. This relates more to my exploration of spectacle and entertainment. This was also somewhat upheld in these two theatres with the discussion of sponsors; however, they were both able to produce shows regardless of sponsor approval if necessary. On the other hand, the Hult Center, usually the most expensive theatre of the five, was willing to produce a show including nudity.

- Volunteer-based theatres will be more open to risk, original productions, and socially active theatre. This would be because they can work with a lower budget given that they are not paying actors or crew members. If they offend anyone, or their shows have smaller audiences, there are less economic consequences. However, they will face limitations in how many shows they can produce and the quality given budget constraints.

Outcome: This seems to be upheld by Minority Voices, although becoming part of a community theatre did not change their status in this regard. Minority Voices is more willing to use non-professional actors in order to get accurate representation of

minorities. This seems to be because they are more concerned with the accurate representation of people than with show quality in terms of professional actors. They also do not plan full seasons ahead like the other theatres, allowing them to pick a project and do it with less planning and to time their shows around societal happenings.

Hypothesis: Applied / Prefunded Theatre (theatre groups funded by an organization such as a university, that don't rely on sales) will depend largely on the wishes of the donor, more so than the mission of the theatre performers or participants. This would be because without the donor, no theatre can take place.

Outcome: This was not upheld by Rehearsals for Life. Once the project was created, the "donor" seemed to have a much more hands-off approach and is not as concerned with the content of their performances as much as its function within the university and their diversity program.

New Findings:

Theatres were just as worried about being too antiquated in their portrayal of people as they were about including them. They didn't want pushback for showing violence against minorities or women onstage, and they were careful to represent people accurately when they were included in a show. This was unexpected from the viewpoint that including diverse people was seen to be high risk.

Recommendations for Further Action and Study

This study only included five theatres, and so is not generalizable to all theatres of these types. I would be interested to see how the study would change in a much more conservative (Republican) city or area.

A bigger study faces the difficulty of constructing an appropriate questionnaire. It would be hard to do a questionnaire or short survey asking these questions, which would be needed if one were to do a study of many theatres throughout the country. If one were able to study theatres across the United States, it would be interesting to see which shows were the most popular (done in the most theatres) throughout the country in a given year. This could then be analyzed in relation to ticket price and theatre size. Based on my study, I might expect that those with higher dependence on ticket sales for the revenue would be more likely to pick the most popular shows that year, whereas if there are shows only done a few times throughout the country, those would be more likely to be under theatres that depend less on sales and are more experimental.

I would recommend that if theatres are attempting to be more socially active, they be more willing to cast minority actors from the community, even if it means a show of slightly less quality than bringing in a professional actor. This also helps add diverse actors to the pool and give them experience. It seems that if there are no experienced actors of a certain race, ethnicity, etc. in a community, pulling already experienced actors from out of town only makes the problem worse. Training a less experienced actors opens up the possibility to do more diverse shows in the future.

I would also recommend not being afraid to try shows that are new, or with less name recognition. It seems that while theatres may be concerned with economics, sponsors, and ticket sales, at least here in Eugene, there is the audience for shows that are more socially active or less well-known. Perhaps shows that seem high-risk are not as risky as they might seem. Many of the theatres interviewed were surprised at the

popularity of shows that they did not expect to be popular, or that shows with little name recognition sold as well as they did.

As I documented from the interviews, there are many logistical reasons to do certain shows over others. To remove some of these barriers, I might recommend compiling a list of different shows that your theatre believes to be more controversial. On this list, include shows with a big cast and small cast, a musical, a drama, a comedy, one with a big set, one with a small set, and all other varieties that are part of season planning logistics. Then, if a theatre is trying to be socially active while also balancing a season, this gets easier to pull shows that would work with the others chosen.

If your organization relies on sponsors, I would recommend setting aside money that is “no strings-attached” in case no one is willing to sponsor a show. This might be set aside from a grant or fundraiser or even ticket sales. This minimizes the influence that corporate sponsors have over which shows are chosen. If the money can come from elsewhere, then if a show is left without a sponsor, the show can still continue.

Most theatres plan seasons well in advance. While it might be difficult, I might consider leaving a spot open a bit longer for something even more contemporary. It may be more rushed and slightly less quality, but it would allow for a show that is dealing with issues that are much more current than they would be if a show is planned a year or more in advance. A lot of social issues come into the news and out of it again somewhat quickly, and a spot left open would allow the theatre to do a show at the time an issue is most relevant.

Appendix: IRB Form



DATE: July 18, 2018 **IRB Protocol Number: 07082018.010**

TO: Cosette Adamson, Principal Investigator
Department of Sociology

RE: Protocol entitled, "Applying the Critical Theory of Media to Theatre: a Eugene, OR Case Study"

Notice of Review and Exempt Determination

The above protocol has been reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption as per the Common Rule regulations found at Title 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2). The research is approved to be conducted as described in the attached materials.

Any change to this research will need to be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption, therefore an amendment will need to be submitted for verification prior to initiating proposed changes.

Approval period: July 18, 2018 - July 17, 2023

If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a Progress Report at least 45-days in advance of the study expiration. **Without continued approval, the protocol will expire on July 17, 2023 and human subject research activities must cease.** A closure report must be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

You are responsible for the conduct of this research and adhering to the Investigator Agreement as reiterated below. You must maintain oversight of all research personnel to ensure compliance with the approved protocol.

The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brandi Fleck', written over a light gray rectangular background.

Brandi Fleck
Research Compliance Administrator

COMMITTEE FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS • RESEARCH COMPLIANCE SERVICES
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