**Performance, Experience, Transformation: What do Spectators Value in Theatre?**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the findings of “Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution” (TSVA), a research project conducted by the British Theatre Consortium (BTC, a small think-tank of playwrights and theatre academics) in 2013-14. The project team developed partnerships with three theatres – the Young Vic, RSC, and Theatre Royal (Drum) in Plymouth – to investigate how spectators attribute value to the performances they see.

Based on empirical research gathered through surveys but enhanced by additional data from interviews and creative workshops, TSVA revealed both the necessity and limitations of empirically based research methodologies. Quantitative research methods are helpful in the collation and mapping of demographic data on theatre audiences (age, gender, educational background, etc.); however, when research seeks to address processual activities rooted in phenomenological experience, qualitative methodologies are especially useful. TSVA found strong evidence that spectators assign value to theatre as a result of the complex associations that emerge between the performance, their personal networks, and the larger public context; moreover, these values are liable to change over time. This article explores the methods, findings and implications of the TVSA project with reference to two production case studies at the Young Vic – Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* (staged in 2014) and David Greig’s *The Events* (2013).

**Keywords:** spectatorship, audience, cultural value, qualitative methodology.

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What do people ‘do’ with their theatrical experiences? How do they acquire meaning and value among other experiences and relationships in the affective flow of everyday life? Is there a way to find out? “Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution” (TSVA) was a research initiative that responded to a call from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for projects to explore methodologies for identifying and evaluating different components of cultural value. It was led by the British Theatre Consortium, a small think-tank of playwrights and theatre academics, and sought to gain a deeper level of knowledge about spectators’ processes of experiencing value when they go to the theatre (see Reinelt et al.).[[1]](#footnote-1) In the UK, cultural value has been much-debated in recent years due to the global economic crisis and the consequent spending cutbacks of the Conservative-led Coalition government from 2010-15; reductions to the Arts Council budget have had a calamitous impact on the ecosystem of British theatre, as Fin Kennedy has documented. The intention of TSVA was to move beyond the economic metrics so favoured by government, but also to look beyond conventional arguments about the intrinsic value of cultural participation advanced by the arts sector as well. In this article, we have chosen to explore one important aspect of TSVA project data: the phenomenological and processual experiences of theatre spectators. This aspect raises questions about the relationship between and implications of combining quantitative / empirical and qualitative / experiential research methodologies in longitudinal studies of value attribution.

The AHRC’s Call for Proposals stressed “the phenomenology of cultural experiences”, encouraging applicants to grapple with the lived experiences of human beings over time. In consequence, the TSVA project was designed to highlight the processual, unfolding experience of ‘being there’ at a theatre event. We also wanted to trace the individual networks and connections that linked specific performances to the larger sociality of people’s lives. Finally, we wanted to explore the role of memory over time in creating or sustaining (or perhaps degrading) the value of the theatre event.

We posited that value emerges in the relationship between the performance, the spectator, and the network of associations which the experience triggers. To probe these layers of activity and affect, we designed a research plan that would require both quantitative methods (in this case, surveys) and qualitative methods (interviews and creative workshops). We partnered with three key British theatres: the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Young Vic in London, and the Theatre Royal (Drum) in Plymouth. Due to time constraints (the project had to be completed in nine months within 2013-14), we were unable to establish a year’s longitudinal horizon for the study (which would have been preferable), so we selected nine productions that were seen by our primary participants supplemented by five more that had been seen by a smaller cohort more than a year previously, for a total of fourteen shows of different types (new plays, adaptations, experimental shows, and classics). For the primary group, we surveyed our participants before, shortly after, and two months after they attended the performance in question. In all, 317 spectators took part in our study.

Each of the surveys had a specific purpose. The first survey gathered basic demographic information about age, gender, profession, geographic location, educational background, habits of theatre attendance, and other leisure activities. We also enquired about our participants’ expectations and their rationale for the choice of play. The second survey, taken shortly after seeing the performance, asked for impressions, memorable images or lines, initial values, and overall satisfaction (or not) with the experience. The third survey focused on what was remembered two months later, whether or not there had been changes in attitude toward the performance, and what remained of the judgements and memories. All three surveys asked about networks of association: for example, did participants talk to others about the performance? Did they associate the play with their own lives or the times in which they lived? Did talking with others change their own view? Was this social aspect important or ancillary to the value of the event? With small changes in wording, we asked twice what spectators valued about theatre and how they ranked this particular event. The spectators who saw their shows over a year earlier were asked similar questions to the core participants, but their surveys highlighted the questions about memory and value.

**On the Role of Quantitative Evidence**

There were 220 respondents to our first survey, of whom 114 also completed the second survey and, of these, 87 completed the third survey. There were also 87 respondents who filled in the longitudinal survey. More than half of respondents were female (60%) and three-quarters of our sample were from the south of England: 29% from London, 35% from the South-West, and 11% from the South-East (this is partly due to the theatres that we surveyed – one in London, one in the South-West).

The quantitative data produced some intriguing insights about audience demographics. For example, in both the first and the longitudinal surveys, we discovered that only 11% and 6% of respondents, respectively, declared their jobs to be in the theatre or other creative arts. In fact, the largest professional cohort in our sample were educators, making up 29% of respondents to the first survey and 23% in the longitudinal survey (a very broad range of occupations was reported overall, from psychotherapist, journalist and civil servant to tax consultant, builder and farmer). We were also struck by the fact that almost two-thirds of spectators (65%) had been involved in school plays, just over two-fifths had been involved in amateur theatre, and over one-fifth in youth theatre. Less than a quarter recorded no prior involvement in theatre. This finding underlines the formative contribution of school-based and youth drama activities in engendering a potentially life-long commitment to the theatre.

We were interested to explore how theatregoers came to associate the shows with their own lives or the wider world. In the second survey, taken shortly after the performance, we asked our sample both of these questions and found that two-thirds connected the experience of the plays with their own lives (67%), but a larger number (84%) connected their experience with the wider world. By the time of the third survey, two months later, there is less evidence of a connection between the plays and their lives or the wider world, although it is still substantial: at this point, 52% of respondents report a connection with their own lives while 67% report making connections with the wider world. This suggests that, even though memories of theatre may fade, there is a persistent degree of association between the performance, its social context and the life experience of the spectator. These answers were, of course, informed by the extent to which specific plays and productions related to the wider world (one of our case studies, David Greig’s *The Events*, is responsive to the Breivik shootings in Norway and, unsurprisingly, generated a high degree of association).

Beyond these changes in intensity of association over time, we also were able to map a diachronic shape to the reception of theatre. This is one of the key findings to emerge from our quantitative data. Asking what was valued and remembered about the performance shortly after participants had seen it, we received results which focused on immediate sensory aspects and affects such as acting, liveness and other production qualities. Two months later, cognitive features surpassed sensory ones, with ‘thinking’ replacing ‘acting’ as the top category cited, and ‘politics’ and ‘relationship’ replacing ‘audience’, ‘music’ and ‘liveness’. This trend continued in the survey completed one year after viewing the performances, where the highest category was actually ‘text’ although production values including acting were clearly still important. The overall pattern that emerges is that spectators experience an immediate response which registers the strong affective and sensory stimulus of the event, followed by a refinement and consolidation of feelings and thoughts toward a more conceptual memory and impact.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We were able to identify a number of other value trends from the quantitative surveys, including a positive relationship between the amount of memories an experience generated and the value attributed to it. While most spectators discuss their experiences with others (as we explore in the next section), we also discovered that they do not think that doing so changes their own opinions or values. However, the data collected from different times indicates that people do, in fact, appear to change their minds, values, and recollections. These are not necessarily contradictory findings, but they need to be unpicked on an individual basis to see what correlations dissolve or abide. We argue that the only way to do this is to investigate and augment the survey data through qualitative means.

**On the Role of Qualitative Evidence**

In opting for a combination of methods, we followed the example of contemporaneous research projects on cultural participation and, in so doing, hoped to gain an understanding of how each was best suited to specific aspects of our work.[[3]](#footnote-3) The survey data produced insights, as indicated above, but proved insufficient in helping us identify and explain key aspects of spectators’ experiences. In part, this is because the nature of our inquiry required access to internal mental maps and associations on an individual basis. We wanted to capture the processual development of individuals’ value attribution over time – this meant not only a longitudinal consideration of changing valences of meaning and value, but also a deep analysis of associational patterns that may not look obvious or meaningful without explanations that could only be provided by our participants themselves in dialogue with others. We used interviews and creative workshops to enable us to look for these dimensions and compare them to the other data we had collected.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the next section of the article we focus on the productions of Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* and David Greig’s *The Events* (both performed at the Young Vic in early 2014) to describe what we learned with regard to two important topics: how the personal associational networks connected to family, friends, education, employment, past experiences and so on, contribute to a sense of value, and how sociality affects theatre attendance, leading to value attribution.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Case Study 1: Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days***

With respect to *Happy Days*, many of the respondents were seasoned theatregoers with recent experiences of seeing Shakespeare, new plays and revivals, and a number were fans of Beckett.[[6]](#footnote-6) They chose the show because of the opportunity it presented to see a classic play with a renowned actress, Juliet Stevenson, in the lead role; the perceived reputation of the Young Vic for high-quality work was also an important factor. The majority expected to be stimulated and intellectually challenged by the production.

Notable sensory moments for our respondents included the physical incapacitation of Stevenson at the start of Act Two, the use and volume of sound, the impressive set, and Stevenson’s gesture repertoire and, in particular, her (literal) smiling in the face of adversity. For those who did not know the play, the sense of shock was palpable in many of the survey responses although this took a negative inflection for some: one participant was attracted to the show because of its lead actress yet described the whole experience as “horrendous” and without value.[[7]](#footnote-7) Others appreciated (and remembered afterwards) the strong opening and closing moments, the comedy, the relative silence / inaction of Willie, the somehow very “English” performance of Stevenson, the visceral impact of the set, the sound of gravel and sirens, and the parched colour palette. There were a broad range of theatrical associations, from Harold Pinter and other Beckett pieces to Henrik Ibsen and Kim Cattrall’s performance of a paralysed woman in the West End revival of Brian Clarke’s play, *Whose Life is it Anyway?* (Comedy Theatre, 2005).

Many spectators offered broad statements on “the human condition” and the inevitability of decline and death; others felt that the show offered a moving depiction of the infirmities of old age, or an indictment of the “cost of capitalism” in a time of austerity. In its aftermath, the majority of spectators discussed the production face-to-face, mostly with friends and partners. There was some evidence of a gender divide in the reception of the play: women identified with its sexual politics and clarified this aspect of the play to men afterwards. In particular, there was a strong personal identification with Winnie as the beleaguered wife of a seemingly unresponsive man (as one respondent put it, “it cast a light on my most important inter-personal relationship”). In the creative workshop at the Young Vic, one participant made a connection between *Happy Days* and his father’s reluctance to move beyond repetitive and familiar phrases to deal with emotional realities. At certain times of personal tension or change, then, the experience of theatre appears to serve the very immediate emotional and imaginative needs of its audience members.

**Case Study 2: David Greig’s *The Events***

*The Events* does not directly specify the events in 2011 on which it was based, when Anders Breivik murdered 77 people, including 69 young adults, on the island of Utøya in Norway. The fictional play deals with the aftermath of a violent attack on a church choir by a young man, and in particular its impact on Claire, a priest who leads the choir and survives the attack. Spectators connected the play not only to the Norwegian situation, but also to school shootings and other similar events, so connections to ‘the wider world’ were evident throughout their responses, perhaps more strongly than in the other productions. Many people had heard about the play, which had already premiered in Edinburgh, and a number of our subjects knew Greig to be a talented playwright. They chose to attend *The Events* with a high consciousness of what they were going to see and the gravity of the subject matter.[[8]](#footnote-8)

While commenting on various important moments in the production, such as when Claire suddenly throws a cup of tea in a rare expression of rage, the spectators we interviewed mostly spoke about how moved they were by the performance, and especially by the amateur choirs that nightly participated in the action. Recruited from local neighbourhoods and regions, these choirs brought a freshness and reality to the production that our subjects could not often explain but definitely felt.

There were also a significant number of personal associations that people shared: for one immigrant to Britain, the fact that a black actor played the young man heightened his own sense of his outsider position. However, he also commented, “In a way it was very interesting to hear … the opinions of the murderer because of course that’s … what many people think or they are afraid of, the different cultures … so in a way it’s mind-opening”. Another spectator had a complex reading of the play to share:

I think *The Events* was quite interesting in that one of the themes of the play was how do people cope with being involved in a terrorist event like that or […] any traumatic event. One of the issues they were dealing with in the play was one of the key characters tried to really deny the importance of what had happened, or wanted to try and seek justice or some sense of meaning in what had happened, and my feeling about the play was that one of the things they were saying was that you, you can’t, there isn’t any meaning in it, I mean you just have to move on and think, think uplifting thoughts, which is what I think the choir was doing.

However, this spectator did not easily share this interpretation, instead saying, “It did make me think a lot about what was happening in … in the play, but I didn’t talk to other people about it, didn’t tell my reaction to other people very much because it was quite a strong reaction; I felt it was a very personal reaction so it was actually much easier to write it down [*laughs*] in an anonymous or in an online survey than talk to people about it correctly”.

The strong affect of this performance on its spectators was the key piece of knowledge that we took away from these interviews: it was evidenced, not specifically in what they said, as much as the tone, inflections and rhythms in which they spoke about their experiences.

**On Memory and Value**

Our research showed that conversations about theatre continue long after the performance is over and do not drop away significantly in the first year. An overwhelming number of respondents – 93% – discussed the performance with others after seeing it. Two months later, 84% reported communicating with others and, in the one-year-after study, the percentage was back up to 89%. However, there was no way we could know what sorts of conversations were held, why they continued or not, or what might have happened to individuals that affected their memories of the event and stimulated (or not) desire to discuss the experience further. To map those webs of relations, we needed to interview people.

Participant One went to see the RSC production of *Candide*.[[9]](#footnote-9) He listed his profession as a lecturer in the first survey, and mentioned in his second survey that he thought the play was “suitable for classroom study”. He also said he spoke about the play with his son. In interview, it emerged that the participant is an English Literature lecturer, and that his son is an adult training for the same profession. They no longer live in proximity, and attending this performance was a special treat devised for his son on a recent visit. He did not have prior knowledge of Voltaire’s *Candide* nor of Mark Ravenhill but he selected the show because he trusted the quality of RSC productions. The chance to be with his son and interact with him (they discussed the play in the bar afterwards) was an important occasion for this man, who had only marginal interest in the play until the chance to share it with his son endowed it with additional meaning. However, he had plenty to say about the ideas in the play and related it to a range of other plays and memorable theatre experiences. Only by speaking with him were we able to see how the performance fit into aspects of his professional, familial and cultural lives. The loose association of teaching literature as a profession, *Candide* as “literature” (as well as theatre), his consideration of the text as appropriate for the school curriculum, and his companionable discussion with his son – who also shared his professional interest – embedded this event within the texture and complexity of his life, and helps account for his high valuation.

Participant Two attended the production of Doug Lucie’s *Solid Air* at the Plymouth Drum and identified his appreciation of the musician-characters John Martyn and Nick Drake as an important factor in his decision to see the show.[[10]](#footnote-10) Moreover, he also specifically mentioned living through the 1970s and the political themes of the play. Tracing his associational networks, he said he usually does not talk about his theatre experiences with anyone but his partner, but this time he posted to Facebook:

The reason I done that, I’ve got friends I don’t really see a lot now from the past, who’d have been round in those days and I was sort of surprised that someone … that I wouldn’t have expected to normally go to theatre had gone, simply because of the John Martyn connection, so it meant there was a discussion about the production which went on, sort of further and longer than would normally happen. Normally a conversation on theatre is on the way home in the taxi and that’s about the level to be quite honest.

While he enjoyed being a part of this discussion, he does not think that talking with others about theatre experiences usually affects his own response to performances: “I’ve been going [to the] theatre a long time now, I’m 66, I’m pretty good at making my own mind up about how much I’ve enjoyed something or not and the fact that someone else enjoyed something that maybe I found flat or whatever, it wouldn’t really affect me”. Still, someone who does not usually talk about theatre except with his partner and who does not think what others say affects his views does, nonetheless, conceive theatre as something done with others. He would not think of going to the theatre alone, although he goes to the cinema alone sometimes, because “[with theatre] it’s just a social thing; you’re with other people, aren’t you?”. Further on in the interview, he mentioned that he has attended post-show discussions at Plymouth’s Theatre Royal (“a sort of lively bar area in the theatre where people would have a drink […] and [I] enjoyed them”), but also, in the next breath, said that he often returns home in a taxi because “you can over-discuss theatre, to the level of killing it, you know?”. By the end of the interview, it became clear that the music and the political / historical themes of the play led to important discussions, but that he is ambivalent about the sociality involved, does not always seek it out, and finds it meaningful sometimes but not always. What looks contradictory in his account (that, for example, he would not want to go to the theatre alone, but also prefers sometimes to avoid discussions and at other times to seek them out) begins to make sense once the connecting pieces of this man’s narrative about how he experiences the theatre come together. He participates in the sociality of theatre as an institution, but also keeps his own counsel, for as he says, he is “pretty good at making [his] own mind up”.

From the surveys, we learned that Participant Three completed A-levels in school, works as an administrator, and first went to the theatre when she was five years old. She has been involved in school plays and, later in life, amateur theatre. Although she valued highly the experience of seeing the RSC production of *Wolf Hall*, she did not disclose any connections to her own life or current events in the play (in either of the two surveys).[[11]](#footnote-11) When we spoke with her, we found out that the excitement of live theatre, especially when she had herself been involved in it, is the major value she finds in attending. She remembered details from many past performances (both positive and negative), including specific aspects of staging, acting, and special effects. She liked to imagine how she herself would stage or act these pieces, and expressed a desire to direct Michael Frayn’s *Copenhagen*, a play she had previously performed in: “This is what happens, you see: I see something and I think well perhaps I will do that someday”. She stated that she does not often think about connections between herself and current events when she attends plays, explaining that she is more interested in how it is staged: “[I] went to see the *Wolf Hall* because I read the book … [I] wanted to see that transferred to the stage because I wasn’t quite sure how that would be done … so my interest was more practical than an emotional experience initially”. Gradually emerging from her self-description was someone very interested in the craft of theatre, in relation to her own creative interests and judgements.

This profile was enhanced when we traced her theatre experiences from earliest memories of *Peter Pan* at five years old to acting the role of a king in a school play when living abroad with her parents. She remembers discovering how to make people laugh and loving it. Later, when she was fifteen, she hoped to go to drama school, but her parents took her abroad again where they enrolled her in a commercial college. After that, she married and became employed (“My other work is fairly mundane, I’ve been office staff”). Now, approaching retirement, she looks forward to resuming her theatrical activities. Asked if theatre had been important to her in her life, she responded: “Yeah, well it is important to me, I mean, I haven’t done so much amateur theatre in recent years, there’s been nothing ... as I’ve grown older … but for me, when I leave work next year I will be down the amateur group as much as I was a few years ago, involved in different ways, hopefully directing a play: that’s me, that’s my interest completely”. A long-ranged look at this woman’s experiences suggests the value of creative activity in the theatre that is missing in her everyday life (except when she has been involved in amateur theatre) and a keen attachment to it which will project into the later stages of her life.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Implications of the TSVA Project: Theatre as ‘Lifelong Learning’**

Before the publication of the TSVA report, the project team led a series of meetings at the three partner theatres in order to share our findings with participants, theatre staff and members of the public.[[13]](#footnote-13) At these events, many attendees endorsed the value we placed on qualitative research. Becky Loftus, Head of Audience Insight at the RSC, commented that the company – which has conducted audience research for many years – surveys its audiences about six qualitative “audience engagement elements” which include “shared experience and atmosphere”, “fun and engagement” and “learning and challenge”. This marks a robust attempt by the RSC to locate discussions of value attribution in experiential terms. Ed Borlase, the Marketing Officer at the Theatre Royal, Plymouth, expressed similar sentiments: the company’s survey work has become more qualitative over time and survey responses influence the programming of the theatre’s repertoire. Meanwhile, Stacy Coyne, Director of Marketing and Press at the Young Vic, remarked that the TSVA project encourages theatres to rethink how and when they communicate with patrons. The Young Vic envisions a move “beyond” marketing so that the entire theatre environment – architecture, Front of House, bar – more emphatically reflects the value priorities of audiences. The theatre has also developed innovative ways of engaging its patrons across multiple media platforms: for instance, by releasing short films online to generate discussion and a sense of expectation around specific productions. Indeed, the importance of new technologies and social media in enhancing the experience of cultural participation is a notable emphasis in comparable studies of other art forms.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Building a sense of anticipation is an important factor in setting terms for value creation in cultural activity. The 2011 study, *Intrinsic Impact: How Audiences and Visitors are Transformed by Cultural Experiences in Liverpool*, commissioned by the Liverpool Arts Regeneration Consortium (LARC, comprised of eight arts and cultural organisations in the city), offers important insights in this respect. The project addressed the question, “How are people transformed by arts experiences? Attendance figures and box office receipts do not tell the full story of the transformative impact of the arts” (Baker Richards and WolfBrown 3). A total of 3,332 surveys were completed by audiences and visitors at 25 different programmes over the 2009-10 season. The research findings are reported in relation to patrons’ so-called “readiness to receive” artistic experience: the three primary “constructs of readiness” (Baker Richards and WolfBrown 7) are identified as “context,” “relevance” and “anticipation”, and “six constructs of intrinsic impact” are designated as “captivation, emotional resonance, spiritual value, intellectual stimulation, aesthetic growth and social bonding” (Baker Richards and WolfBrown 3). A key element in a patron’s “readiness” to encounter the artwork is preparation: “Those [respondents] who prepare are significantly more likely to report higher levels of emotional resonance. In other words, higher levels of frequency and context *can* lead to higher levels of impact. This argues for expanded efforts amongst arts and cultural providers to contextualise their programmes” (Baker Richards and WolfBrown 14). In planning for the enhancement of value attribution in future, theatres will need to look to prepare their patrons’ “readiness to receive” before they see a show, for example by deepening their appreciation of production context: “do theatre patrons who read a synopsis in advance of attending a play report higher anticipation levels than those who attend a pre‐performance talk, or *vice versa*?” (Baker Richards and WolfBrown 15).

The corollary to pre-show “readiness to receive” is post-show opportunity to reflect, but our findings suggest that reflection activities need to extend beyond the staple fare of post-show platform interview or panel discussion. The *Spirit of Theatre* initiative in 2012-13, which piloted the qualitative research methods employed in TSVA, highlights the potential benefits to be accrued from spectator involvement in structured, personal and shared reflections on theatre experience. Led by playwright and academic Julie Wilkinson and managed by director Chris Bridgman with support from Manchester Metropolitan University, BTC, and the Library Theatre in Manchester, *Spirit of Theatre* focused on the legacy of the Library Theatre at a particularly sensitive moment in its history, when the theatre was moving from its long-standing home in the basement of Manchester’s Central Library to a newly-built arts centre in a collaboration with Cornerhouse Cinema. The project team used surveys, interviews and creative workshops focused on spectator responses to Chris Honer’s 2013 production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*. Wilkinson’s report draws special attention to the significance of the creative workshops:

Every interviewee created a narrative of their relationship to the theatre, using the opportunity to invent a character that embodied their key ideas. The technique appears to offer a new way of recognising the agency of the contributor in the research process consistent with the re-visioning of the spectator as an active participant in the construction of value. (Wilkinson 65)

*Spirit of Theatre* affirms the patron as an untapped resource in the creation of cultural value with potentially far-reaching implications for theatre’s “public role” (Wilkinson 63). This construction of the spectator as “active participant” in value creation is endorsed by the findings emerging from the quantitative methods of TSVA.

The report of our project, *Critical Mass: Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution*, was published in July 2014. In an article for the *Guardian* newspaper published at the same time, playwright and BTC member David Edgar emphasised theatre’s capacity to attract long-term commitment from its audiences: “theatre provides most value as a form of lifelong learning rather than an occasional treat”. In order to maximise the value of “lifelong learning”, we recommend that theatres develop forms of engagement with their patrons that are responsive to the diachronic shift from sensory appreciation to more conceptual judgements of value that our research has posited: “By reminding their spectators of the performances they have seen, it may actually profoundly augment and enhance the value of the performance the theatres provide” (Reinelt et al. 53).[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Conclusion**

The TSVA initiative sought to design and implement approaches to the research of cultural value that would help identify spectator experience in theatre over time. We worked with a relatively small sample of participants and, in consequence, our final report recommends that further longitudinal research be undertaken to test our conclusions; such research will require sufficient provision of funding and resources to enable the collation of “big data” over longer stretches of time (Reinelt et al. 90-93). Nonetheless, despite the limited parameters of TSVA, our conclusions show the capacity of qualitative methodologies (interviews and creative workshops) to augment quantitative data with reference to the detail and specificity of individual experience. Participants in our project place theatre at the nexus of a critical sociality that opens up associational correspondences with their own lives and with the wider world; furthermore, the value they attribute to theatrical experience is liable to be inflected differently as time passes, often in dialogue with others, marking a trajectory from sensory to cognitive to conceptual judgements and recollections. Our respondents use their experience of theatre to build social and familial networks, to deepen their self-reflection, to enhance their empathic understanding, to gain access to imagined worlds, to explore the meaning of behaviour in social life, and to exercise what we have called “an active and self-determining role as critical spectator” (Reinelt et al. 87). These findings, while providing arts organisations with food for thought about the preparatory and reflective opportunities they might make available to their patrons in future, also reinforce the need for further longitudinal research on the dynamics of value attribution in theatrical performance.

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1. The project team was comprised of Janelle Reinelt (Principal Investigator), David Edgar, Chris Megson, Dan Rebellato, Julie Wilkinson and Jane Woddis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Readers interested in how the categories were derived and in having more detail about these comparisons are referred to the project report (Reinelt et al.). For further reflections on the project as a whole in relation to spectator studies in theatre and performance, see Reinelt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, the website for the AHRC’s five-year “Understanding Everyday Participation: Articulating Cultural Values” project, led by an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the universities of Manchester, Exeter, Leicester and Warwick. The project combines qualitative and (interview-based) quantitative methodologies to investigate “the detail, dynamics and significance of ‘everyday participation’”. (See Miles.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Between November 2013 and April 2014, four interviewers conducted 31 phone interviews (invitations were sent out by e-mail to audience members who had agreed to be interviewed). The structure of the interviews tested the proposition that spectators do evaluate on the basis of a network of associations, both social and mental. The creative workshops, led by Julie Wilkinson, were held at each of the partner theatres. The workshops lasted two hours and included group discussion and creative exercises related to the memories and associations of the show that participants had seen. The interviews and creative workshops were helpful in enabling the TSVA project team to apprehend how participants themselves process and value their experiences in theatre. See chapter seven and appendices A and C of the project report for fuller information about the qualitative methods used in TSVA (see Reinelt et al.). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘Sociality’ means in this context the social nature of human beings and also their (self-) organisation into multiple interactive communities as one key aspect of human behaviour. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*. Director: Natalie Abrahami. Designer: Vicki Mortimer. Young Vic, London. 23 January – 8 March 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. All interview quotations are protected data and have been anonymised in keeping with our research ethics protocols. Quotations are transcribed with minimal editorial intervention: a pause in speech is marked by an ellipsis; an edit is marked by an ellipsis in square brackets. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. David Greig, *The Events*. Director: Ramin Gray. Designer: Chloe Lamford. Young Vic, London. Co-produced with the Actors Touring Company and Brageteatret & Schauspielhaus Wien. 9 October – 2 November 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mark Ravenhill, *Candide*. Director: Lyndsey Turner. Designer: Soutra Gilmour. RSC, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 29 August – 26 October 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Doug Lucie, *Solid Air*. Director: Mike Bradwell. Designer: Bob Bailey. Theatre Royal Plymouth (Drum). 7 – 23 November 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Wolf Hall*, a dramatisation of Hilary Mantel’s novel by Mike Poulton. Director: Jeremy Herrin. Designer: Christopher Oram. RSC, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. 11 December 2013 – 29 March 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For a look at other research which corroborates the enrichment value of the arts in the life narrative of participants, see Ben Walmsley’s study, which shares a good deal with our approaches and findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The public meetings were held on 8 May (RSC), 9 May (Theatre Royal, Plymouth) and 29 May 2014 (Young Vic). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For example, the UK Film Council’s report *Stories We Tell Ourselves: The Cultural Impact of UK Film, 1946-2006* analyses the cultural impact of British cinema. The report notes the democratising effect of the internet on audience appreciation of film: “in place of a top-down hierarchy of critical judgment, there are now highly democratic virtual communities of interlocutors” (see Narval Media, Birkbeck College, and Media Consulting Group 7). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. However, embarking on this kind of dialogue presents certain challenges: as some theatre personnel recounted to us, there is a possibility that such overtures from theatres to their patrons will be regarded sceptically by the latter as a surreptitious marketing ploy. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)