

Audience Response Survey Analysis

FATE – Performed Nov 2013

Overview

Of the five hundred audience members, two hundred chose to fill in audience response surveys. This paper examines these responses. It is a small case study but one that gives deep insight into a particular community performance event.

Two thirds of the responders to the surveys were made up of family or friends of the cast, whilst the remaining third were unknown to the cast and had been brought to the show through social media or other publicity.

The cast of *Fate* was made up of culturally diverse young people from socially and economically disadvantaged suburbs of Melbourne's inner west. This included young people from the following cultural backgrounds: Pacific Islander, South East Asian, Horn of African, West African, southern European, Latin American, Middle Eastern, West Indian and Anglo-Celtic. They were all resident in the inner or outer suburbs of Melbourne.

The sense in which the participants' family and friends might be described as a 'community' is two-fold: one, geographically they inhabit the same culturally diverse area of the city and two, they have a connection to the art-making practice of a family member or friend.

When asked, all but two of the thirty cast members said that the overwhelming majority of the people they knew who had attended the shows were not regular attenders of mainstream performing arts events.

A quarter of the audience self-identified as speaking a language other than English at home. The age groups of the audience who responded broke down as follows: under 20 – 16%; 20-25 – 16%; 25-35 – 20% and over 35 – 48%.

This cultural and age breakdown does not necessarily reflect the actual audience but rather those people who were more likely to fill in a written audience response survey. There are a number of barriers including literacy and language issues, peer pressure for some young people that may have influenced who did and did not fill in a survey. So although the sample under scrutiny is 40% of the total audience, inevitably it is made up of those who were more inclined to complete a survey.

Audience response analysis

So what does the data tell us about what this community audience thought of *Fate*?

The first thing to note is that generally they rated it highly. Overall, 71% of responders said that they rated the work as 'Artistically Excellent' and 94% rated it as either 'Artistically Excellent' or 'Very Good'. They also thought it

was relevant to young people: 70% described it as ‘Highly Relevant’ and 98% described it as either ‘Highly Relevant’ or ‘Relevant’.

Of course there is some likelihood that family and friends of cast members are going to rate the performance in positive terms so the comparison between these responders and those who were not connected to the cast is important.

Of responders not connected to the cast, 55% rated the work as ‘Artistically Excellent’ – 20% lower than the overall sample – but 94% of these responders rated the work as either ‘Artistically Excellent’ or ‘Very Good’, the same figure as for the whole sample.

The figures for ‘Relevance’ are virtually the same for those unconnected to the cast and the sample as a whole. So although this sub-group is more nuanced in its appreciation of the work, it still rates it highly. Arguably, this comparison lends greater credibility to the very high approval ratings of the sample as a whole by demonstrating that it does not derive simply from family and friends of cast members being supportive.

The audience response form asked responders to comment on the ‘Performance’ and the ‘Story’ as well as any other comment they wished to make. Nearly all responders chose to make some written statement. These statements have been categorized as follows indicating the percentage of all responders who made comments about each category:

Stories	71%
Music	52%
Performances	26%
Comedy	17%
Physical Theatre	11%
Mythological Content	7%
Culturally Diverse nature of cast & content	7%

The comments are, as one might expect given the context, overwhelmingly positive, but what do they tell us about what this audience valued in this work?

Taken together, the comments about acting performances, comedy, physical theatre and the blend of hip-hop and gospel style choral music, show a strong appreciation of the art forms at play in *Fate*. There were also 7% of people who enjoyed the fact that the cast members were highly culturally diverse.

A breakdown of this data reveals some interesting but perhaps not altogether surprising differences between different groups of responders. For example, younger people commented on the comedy in the work more than older ones (20% to 14%).

Audience members not connected to the cast commented on the physical theatre in the work rather more than those who were connected to the cast (14% to 10%). Perhaps suggesting an appreciation on their part of a more sophisticated theatrical language.

Older responders commented more frequently on the cultural diversity of the cast (12%) compared to younger responders (3%), perhaps because cultural diversity is more of a given in the lives of younger urban Australians.

Although not statistically significant in terms of being able to draw any firm conclusions, this breakdown does contribute to the complex picture of what the audience valued.

Performance

It is from the qualitative data however that the real community voice begins to be heard. The first analysis here is of the audience's written comments and specifically an examining of those that relate to the performance of *Fate*, including what might be termed the 'technical aspects' of the performance.

There are a number of comments about the whole cast working as an 'ensemble'. Although this somewhat technical term is only used by one respondent who refers to the 'energy of the ensemble'. Others refer to perception that each individual was given a chance to be the center of attention at some point in the performance – i.e. they were not just there as crowd actors or chorus:

"Nobody was held back"

"Each person was unlimited and were able to express their character"

Another aspect of this theme is that the cast were perceived to have been working well as a 'team' – the word is used a number of times - and perhaps more predictably that they were having fun. A typical comment refers to '*how much fun everyone was having on stage*'. One respondent describes this aspect of the work as '*The vibrancy of the young performers*' suggesting a

strong and joyful animation in the performance that was appreciated by some members of the audience.

There are a significant number of comments on the acting. Some of these use semi-technical terms such as *'Great comic and dramatic delivery'* or *'striking gestures'* - whilst others use their own terminology to make similar points: actors *'were spot on with making me believe it was true'* or *'All the actors were on point'*.

There were some critical comments from people who seem to have a greater knowledge of the theatre art-form:

'Actor wise clarity in speech and speed, face expression need to increase.'

'Sometimes we lost the 'performers' faces/eyes as they were looking down a lot'

One respondent writes about the ways the cast could move to *'the next level'* suggesting that for this person there is a hierarchy of production quality and that *Fate* was located some way from the top level:

'Use of contrast would take the production to the next level e.g. punctuate the action and the high volume parts with stillness/ slowness/ more relaxed volume.'

Over all, 11% of responders favorably mentioned the physical theatre style of the work. *Fate* used a 'poor theatre' (Grotowski 2002) performance style with virtually no props and very few set elements. Performers using their bodies created all key objects such as furniture, boats and most notably a car that feature strongly in the narrative. In their comments, responders show that they thought this aspect of the work was both entertaining and effective. For example:

'Best parts were when actors would form themselves into a car/ship. Their facial expressions made me laugh and when they danced in-between scenes, it was very moving and enjoyable.'

Another responder refers to this style as *'abstract performing'*. Four people used the word *'prop'* in describing this style, suggesting a limited knowledge of theatre because the word *'prop'* (from *'property'*) more accurately represents an object an actor might use, such as a pen or a knife, to enhance her/his performance and not a boat or a car that would more commonly be referred to as a set element.

This lack of familiarity with theatre and its language and conventions suggests that the physical style of the piece may have been new to these audience members although it is a very commonly used performance style in alternative theatre settings. This suggests that there is a desire to engage with the theatre art form but only a limited technical language with which to do it. On the other hand, for a significant section of the audience, the physical theatre

style was a highly effective and entertaining aspect of the work for which they expressed a strong aesthetic preference.

There are a number of comments about other 'technical' aspects of the performance: the direction, the narrative structure of the work, the interaction of the music and theatre and the production values in terms of set, costume and lighting.

There is a small group of responders who write about the high quality direction of the work, as they perceived it. Some use theatrical terms – *'Brechtian, 'dramatic tension'* – others focus on the integration of the diverse groups of young people within the cast: *'praise for the director, writer and all who pulled together the different groups so brilliantly'*, supporting the comments considered above concerning ensemble. A larger group refers positively to the dramatic structure of the work:

'the unfolding of parallel stories not immediately but suspense-fully'

'plotlines wove into each other'

'the structure - stylish and beautiful'

A key-component of this structure is the transitioning between scenes. This is commented on by some responders, for example: *'loved the segues - really smooth and tight'*.

In a preview performance in Flemington Community Centre, when this aspect of the performance wasn't fully rehearsed, there was critical commentary: *'transitions need to be swifter'*.

A number of responders comment favorably on the way in which the music and the theatre were integrated in the performance:

'worked well having music through-out but not overtaking the performance'

'good balance music story and movement'

'interplay of narrative and music'

These comments show an understanding of the complexity of combining music and theatre without either art form dominating.

Three responders made critical comments about lighting, costume and set elements although this was balanced by two positive comments on these aspects of the work. The production had a big cast and a very limited production budget so there may have been an expectation on some audience members' part that the production should have been more lavish.

Taken overall, what do the comments 'tell us about the audience's perception of the performance?

From the use of language and familiarity with technical terms and concepts we can infer that a small number of responders had theatrical experience although to what degree is unclear; only one responder suggest s/he may be a theatre industry professional by referring to perceived 'levels' of production.

So what of the others?

We see a strong desire to make analytical comments and to pin-point aspects of the work that were perceived favorably – the physical theatre or the dramatic structure – suggesting a limited familiarity with the art-form but a strong desire to engage with it.

The presence of critical voices also suggests a desire on the part of the audience to be in a critical relationship with the work. There was only one instance of destructive criticism: one responder said the best moment was '*when it ended*'; but a small number suggested the performance was too long.

Overall, there is evidence of real thought and substance behind the responders' assessment of the artistic quality of the work that all responders made by ticking a box on the survey form.

Overall these data pertaining to performance can be interpreted as suggesting that the majority of the audience for *Fate* wanted high quality, entertaining theatre that used a relatively sophisticated blend of art-forms and performance styles.

But this is only half the picture because 71% of responders chose to make comments about the *stories* told in *Fate* and these comments reveal more about the meaning of *Fate* as a community performance event.

Fate told the stories of nine culturally diverse young people as they faced challenging situations, experienced random happenings and made choices that might influence their direction in life. It used a complex, interwoven narrative structure to try and create a coherent whole out of these disparate elements.

The first thing to note is the large amount of data relating to these stories. Responders tended to write more extensively about their response to the stories than to other aspects of the work. These complicated responses have been broken down into six categories and analysed within each category in the following order:

1. Narrative Complexity
2. Stories seen as Real, Tough or Confronting.
3. Stories relating to Specific Issues.
4. Stories seen as offering Hope
5. Stories offering Migrant Perspectives
6. The combination of Myth and Contemporary Stories

Starting with narrative complexity, this theme is based on a perception amongst responders that the different narrative threads were combined to make a complex whole. A common metaphor is one of *'weaving'*, used by ten different responders, suggesting a complex inter-section of plot lines in which patterns are clearly discernable:

'The multi-threaded nature of the story helped keep the audience hanging on while reinforcing important narrative themes.'

'So rich, so much happening. Couldn't keep track of all the themes. Many positionalities/ vantage points'

'I liked the interwoven nature of the stories and how we are interconnected and how things that happen to someone can create ripple effect and have ramification for many.'

What was this narrative complexity saying in the view of these responders? What patterns emerged in the warp and weft? One aspect that emerges in the data about narrative complexity is that it was dealing with big themes and ideas – the words *'political'*, *'philosophical'* and *'spiritual'* are all used:

'The mix of social, philosophical and political subject matter – very sophisticated and relevant.'

'It was big stuff they dealt with, that you struggle with even as an adult.'

'The theme was very rich, it was spun out in a lot of different ways, the fate luck/fortune thing played out through character's choices and the way they made sense of life.'

Although some responders refer to the narrative threads *'coming together'* and even the idea of a *'core message'*, more chose to comment on their perception that the stories were open ended and the issues were unresolved. A significant number of responders comment directly on this, for example:

'The fact that it was open ended. Thought provoking'.

A further aspect of this theme concerns the integration of mythological content – an adaptation of the *'Game of Dice'* scene from the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* – into the stories of contemporary young Australians. 7% of responders commented on this scene adding a further dimension to the general appreciation of narrative complexity. For example: *'Real life and legends intertwined really effectively'*.

Related to this mythological element of the work is that 3% of responders saw *Fate* as a *'universal'* exploration of the human condition, including a spiritual dimension. For example: *'spiritual undertones, human search encapsulated well'*.

So in summary, Theme 1 reveals that responders saw the work as exploring big themes using interconnected 'woven' narratives that formed a coherent whole but that is was also left open and unresolved.

Theme 2 is the perception that the work was tough, real and / or confronting. They refer to the stories being 'real', 'grounded in the now' and 'honest'. The stories are widely seen as 'tough' and 'confronting' by some, for example:

'All issues confronted are real. Tasteful and confronting'

'I loved it represented lives of people in our communities with truth and rawness.'

For some people this led to an examination of personal values and beliefs:

'The story was a great metaphor of the questions of life's challenges of beliefs. Between chance, Faith/fate. It leaves one with questions of one's own life.'

'Powerful, disturbing at times – what life is I suppose.'

In summary, the data related to Theme 2 reveals that a section of the audience saw *Fate* as being closely based on the challenges of community life explored in ways that made some responders examine their own values, and to 'think for yourself'.

Theme 3 concerns specific issues. *Fate* was originally conceived as a community work that would explore the issue of problem gambling particularly in new migrant communities but as part of a more complex intersection of social factors. This theme featured strongly in the final work and it is picked up on by a number of responders who see the treatment of this issue as relevant and important:

'All the gambling. It's good to show what gambling addiction can do to a person, relationship, family!'

'My family has been deeply affected by addict gambling it was touching and refreshing to hear the stories told with such artistic soul.'

Perhaps important in the second of these representative quotations is that the issue is explored with an 'artistic soul', suggesting the perception of subtlety and sensitivity in how it was handled.

The other single issue that is widely mentioned is that of asylum seekers. A scene in which the whole cast represented asylum seekers in a boat was commented on positively by a number of responders.

Other single issues that are mentioned by responders are: climate change and the transition from boyhood to manhood. So for some responders, single

issues were important although most of these responders saw these issues as part of a more complex narrative whole.

Theme 4 is the perception amongst many responders that the story, although challenging or even confronting, had a clear message of hope and suggested that young people can take control of their own lives.

They refer to *'hopeful messages'*, people being *'redeemed'*, *'a sense of hope'*, *'taking control of your own reality'*, *'the ability to overcome'*, *'creating your own destiny'* and *'the greater good, caring for humanity'*. This positive theme of hope to some extent contradicts those who saw the work as having 'no answers' suggesting that *Fate* was ultimately open to interpretation by its audience.

A specific aspect of this theme is responders who were emotionally moved by the work. One responder, for example, refers to: *'really poignant bits – made me cry!'* A number of responders specifically mention a scene in which a brother and sister who have separated through bereavement and drug abuse are reunited in what responders saw as an emotionally charged scene.

'The brother and sister, it was a very emotional part, they were spot on with making me believe it was true.'

'I think Jan's role, the struggle, the loss, finding his music, the reuniting with his sister.'

Significant here is the level of emotion, the perceived *'truth'* of the scene and that it is *'redemptive'*, a word used by another respondent, adding to the general theme of hope in the face of adversity.

Theme 5 concerns positive responses to the representation of migrant/refugee perspectives on Australian society. Most of the characters in *Fate* were from other cultures, reflecting the experience and cultures of the young people who created and performed it. This aspect of the work was appreciated by responders, who self-identified as being from refugee/ migrant backgrounds themselves; for example: *'When the artists were talking about refugees'*, *'I loved the refugee part'*. *'The courage of going back to home country'*.

It was also appreciated by some responders who were not from migrant backgrounds:

'The way they made sense of life, their options, their country 'This country changes you' This is a gambling country' Great writing.'

' Discussion of what you get/give up/gamble by coming to Australia'

There is a sense, in these quotes, that these Australians from non-migrant backgrounds find the perspectives of those who are, *'refreshing'* (to quote another responder) and revealing. As one respondent from the Ballarat

performance put it: *'we get so used to seeing only one section of society represented'*.

Summarising these themes altogether, we could say that the responders to *Fate* valued complex, open-ended stories that were grounded in community reality, explored relevant social issues, engaged them emotionally and offered a sense of hope. By no means all of the responders thought all of these things but the list does represent aspects of the performance that the audience thought were important enough to write about.