

You, The Audience

From punter to collaborator: how arts venues might change their relationship with audiences and why they might want to try

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Abstract

You, The Audience began in 2015 as a “giant conversation” between the Royal Exchange Theatre, its artists and its audiences. It aims to re-broker the invisible contract between a theatre and its audiences. Led by the Royal Exchange, working in partnership with the University of Manchester and a range of theatre artists, this action research programme is genuinely audience-centered and has, to date, culminated in an Audience Manifesto (click [here](#)), created by 2,150 members of the public. Following a [symposium](#) in February and the publication of an accompanying article in [Arts Professional](#), we have been approached by a number of national and international organisations and individuals with an interest in *You, The Audience*. We would value this opportunity to share our learnings and, in turn, to learn from others engaged in audience research in the performing arts.

In this presentation we will talk about the programme (details [here](#)) and share some of the learning and provocations that are emerging from it. In addition to the Audience Manifesto, we will share brief examples and visual materials of some of the project’s methods and events eg:

- Artist collaborations (including Chris Thorpe, Oliver East, Jason Singh)
- Events (including a sleepover for 100 audience members aged 9-73, and a one-day symposium for theatre makers, scholars and audiences)
- ‘The Listening Exchange’ (made by Eloise Whitmore and Amanda Stoodley), an intimate installation featuring sound recordings of thousands of audience members sharing their hopes, passions and demands for 21st century theatre.

We will discuss the ways in which the theatre and the University have collaborated, and illustrate this with some of the work produced by and with audiences. We will consider how arts venues engage with visitors and audiences as [participants](#) – not just in their participatory programmes, but through the ways in which they make and present professional work. And we will consider how audiences can be empowered through reconsiderations of the relationship between spectator and performer. We will talk about the ways that our thinking and learning have developed over the course of several years’ worth of dialogue, work and engagement, and focus on what the Audience Manifesto tells us about the project to date and its implications for the theatre’s future.

You, The Audience continues to challenge and inspire us, and is leading the theatre to rethink the idea of ‘audiences’ – who they are, as individuals and as a community, how we talk about ‘participation’ and what happens when we consider audiences as active collaborators: how we listen and empower, and how this might be key to re-imagining this and other theatre buildings and their relationship with the communities who are at their heart.

