

Diversifying Audiences in the Performing Arts: Easy to say, Hard to Do

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Abstract

Over the past year the authors have been engaged on a project evaluating the impact of a new multi artform festival in Melbourne. Asia TOPA (Triennial of Performing Arts) is a major arts and cultural event running from Feb – April 2017 and involving a complex and wide ranging series of collaborations between local, national and international artists and arts organisations. It was clear from our interviews that one of the primary goals for those participating in the festival was the opportunity Asia TOPA presented to diversify their audiences through programming and marketing. Such a focus is no surprise; not only do audiences directly contribute box office income, they also vouch for the public value delivered by arts organisations and justify their receipt of public funding. The size, profile and level of engagement of arts audiences is therefore a critical concern for arts organisations and, as a result, audience development and diversification is one of the most significant tasks facing contemporary arts organisations. However, despite the benefits arising from attracting diverse and engaged audiences, many arts organisations participating in Asia TOPA lacked the skills and capacity to commit to audience development. Using a case study approach, the research team identified 6 organisations participating in Asia TOPA, representing a range of art forms and organisational size, to investigate the nature and extent of their efforts and capacities to engage in audience diversification activities. Our findings suggested a spectrum of skills, interests, and organisational commitment, along with some examples of best practice.

The method by which we evaluated these outcomes is the subject of this current paper. First, adapting the Harlow - Wallace Foundation (2014) model, we mapped the extent to which the case study organisations engaged in effective practices for audience diversification. Second, we mapped our findings against the value chain analysis (UNESCO 2009) which identifies the stages of cultural consumption and participation across creation, consumption, distribution, production and impact. Such mapping has highlighted a way not only of modelling audience diversification strategies but of assessing their impact. Our adaption and application of the Harlow model in the context of the UNESCO value chain analysis provides a new way of understanding the nature and range of organisational commitment and skills that provide the preconditions for audience development and diversification in the performing arts.

