THEATER & POLICY SALON
An Evaluation Study of a Pilot Program
Acknowledgments

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Dedicated to the development of thriving communities and a more just world, Creative Generation works to inspire, connect, and amplify the work of young creatives who catalyze social transformation, and those who are committed to cultivating their creative capabilities.

The Incubator for Creative Impact seeks to activate creative projects catalyzing social transformation by building local capacity through providing customized technical assistance and a professional learning community of artists, educators, and community activists.

This report was authored by Kathleen Hill.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Theater and Policy Salon is designed to build a community of theatergoers who are passionate about policy and plays. Beyond November 2019 and July 2020, Creative Generation partnered with Theater and Policy Salon through its Incubator for Creative Impact. The Incubator for Creative Impact seeks to activate creative projects catalyzing social transformation by building local capacity through providing customized technical assistance and a professional learning community of artists, educators, and community activists.

Through this program, the collaboration between Creative Generation and Theater & Policy Salon was driven by three goals:

• To evaluate the impact of educational opportunities for the community of policy-interested theater goers in Washington, D.C.

• To develop a resource bank relevant to the curated performances for each theme in several salons.

• To re-imagine the Theater & Policy Salon brand and increase participation in the DC theater community.

Through an evaluation of audience reactions to the joint performance and Theater and Policy Salon discussion experience at two Theater and Policy Salon events, several themes emerged to provide guidance to both funders as well as Theater & Policy Salon leadership to enable future program success and growth. Creative Generation unearthed the following opportunities:

• Considered and Deliberate Marketing Strategies

• Evolution of Evaluation Tools

While the pilot of the program was met with an overwhelmingly positive response, the following report reveals ways in which the program can be fine-tuned to better serve a more diverse and dynamic audience for continued engagement.
BACKGROUND

The Theater and Policy Salon is designed to build a community of theatergoers who are passionate about policy and plays that speak to policy issues. The vibrant Washington, DC-area theater scene produces a panoply of topical plays each season, often with aligned and overlapping themes. However, each production (and accompanying expert panels) are marketed and sold separately through the individual channels of each theater. As a result, audiences miss out on opportunities to see multiple perspectives as well as to deepen understanding of critical issues. For example, in Fall 2017, Studio Theater, Forum Theater, The Clarice, and Shakespeare Theater Company at the National Academy of Sciences all independently performed plays delving into scientific dilemmas of the mind-body, such as nature versus nurture. Area theater audiences may have seen some of these productions, but few experienced the full series of theatrical perspectives on this epochal scientific quandary. More significantly, theater, science, and policy audiences missed the opportunity to address the scientific and societal implications raised by the plays in a focused, rigorous conversation.

Each Salon will serve as a venue for audience members to process and harness reactions sparked by the artwork. We aim to transform a pattern of periodic encounters among audience members and policymakers into a community engaging in a sustained conversation over several months. The Theater and Policy Salons will energize audience engagement for plays with contemporary relevance while encouraging dialogue about real world policy connections. The Salon can provide an outlet for audiences to address contemporary issues while expanding dialogue between policymakers, audiences and theater community in the Washington, DC area. The Salon can both provide connective tissue and add new actionable responses to the existing performance-specific panels and symposia offered by individual theaters.

Pilot Project

For the pilot season from October 2019 – February 2020, two themes were explored:

- The Refuge, Journey, and Compassion salon will focus on migrants and refugees who face being separated from their home cultures and being outsiders in new communities. The series will look at migrants both as sufferers of displacement as well as courageous individuals who take control of destiny in the face of substantial risks.

- The Attainment, Fulfillment, and Resilience salon will focus on how superstar culture in the U.S. seduces and fails young people from challenged backgrounds and struggling communities, while diverting attention and urgency from systemic obstacles and problems. Defining success in terms of a few superstar examples of success – be it in sports or in academic attainment - covers up deep-rooted problems in these settings and promotes an all or nothing, high risk attitude toward life choices.
METHODOLOGY

Program designers chose to use a post-experience survey tool, which employed a self-reported, self-reflected assessment model.

The survey tool sought to collect data in three arenas:
• The aesthetic impact of the cultural experience on participants;
• Participant demographics related to politics and policy influence; and
• The efficacy of the experience among attendees.

For items 2 and 3 above, a simple set of metrics were determined to measure attitudes and perceptions of attendees.

The methodology devised to evaluate the impact of the aesthetic impact was derived from the Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change framework published by Animating Democracy. This tool was developed for the arts and cultural field to enhance understanding and evaluation of creative work at the intersection of arts and civic engagement, community development, and justice. Through the perspectives authored by this tool, program evaluators south to specifically understand the communal meaning, disruption, emotional experience, risk-taking, coherence, stickiness, and openness of the experience.

A copy of the survey tool is included in the appendix of this report.

The survey had a response rate of approximately 32% of those in attendance at the Salon sessions. In total, 53 surveys were returned for analysis, one of which was returned blank save for contact information. As a result, there is data from 52 attendees featured in this report.

Due to the size of the sample as well as the sampling methodology being non-probability based, it would be “bad statistics” to draw conclusions and apply them to the population of D.C. or the United States at large. This study, however, can still glean valuable insights from this small group and make recommendations to improve future analysis and engagement methodologies.
OBSERVATIONS & FINDINGS

In reviewing the data, it seemed appropriate to bifurcate key findings between those related to the experience and those related to the attendees themselves. The experience, as established between Theater & Policy Salon and Creative Generation, consists of the performance as well as the Salon discussion immediately following it.

Experience

In *Theater Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, author Susan Bennett notes that in North America, “the depoliticizing at the production stage destroyed the play”.¹ Other theater critics and theorists have gone as far as to say that the American theater-going public has a historically anti-political bias when it comes to their appetite for topical policy-related stage productions.² Despite this trend, it seems that audiences are becoming increasingly interested in these types of hard-hitting topical plays. This was exemplified amongst Salon attendees.

Table 1: Aesthetics Framework Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I understand the policy theme better because of the creative exploration of the play.</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a part of a collective dialogue, beyond my own individual perspective, on this policy theme.</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I now see hidden or new perspectives about the policy theme.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe my emotions about the theme are connected to logical beliefs about policy.</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am better able to explore the openness or fluidity of the inherent contradictions in this policy theme.</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand the strong ideas expressed in the play and discussion.</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The policy themes resonate with me on a personal level or with my work.</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By and large, responses were overwhelmingly positive to the overall experience. As shown in Table 1, which features a summary of statistical figures for each topic that the Aesthetics Framework explored on its five-point scale, the average response value was above a 3.8. This shows that audiences are hungry for productions and experiences that allow them to engage with a policy theme. (Individual charts for these questions are available in Appendix A.)

What's more, when asked to reflect on the experience as a whole, 90% of respondents felt positive. Coupled with the figures from Table 1, this shows that policy-focused theater matters to people as it allows them to gain new perspective on and understanding of topical issues through attending Salon events for which there was a considerable demand for more. Though 44% of respondents skipped the question related to whether or not they would like to be contacted for future events or programming (which may be the result of attendees being wary of additional emails), 42% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in learning about future events.

In reviewing these responses, it is incredibly important to critically consider the potential biases of not only attendees but survey respondents as well. As these discussions were voluntarily attended after a performance, there may be selection bias amongst attendees. One such example is that those who are more likely to seek out and enjoy such events in their recreational time will comprise the majority of the audience. Another is that those who enjoyed the quality of the play or the play’s messaging may be more inclined to stay than those who did not.

In a similar vein, one cannot deny that the events occurring in and around the DMV impacts the audience. Washington D.C. is an incredibly political town making the experience a natural fit. Whether or not the program would pilot with such positive results in other cities is an interesting question for further exploration.
Attendees

The respondents were largely comprised (79%) of left-leaning theatergoers, with approximately 27% indicating that they leaned “center-left”, 46% indicating that their political leaning was “left” and an additional 6% indicating that they leaned “far-left”. Only 6% of attendees (i.e. three individuals) in total indicated that they leaned “center-right”, “right” or “far-right”.

According to a 2014 poll completed by Pew Research Center, 73% of residents in the D.C. “lean democrat” or are democrats, 15% of residents have “no lean”, and 11% of residents “lean republican” or are republican.¹ These numbers are fairly similar to those observed amongst our sample respondents. A May 2020 poll completed by Gallup, however, reveals that the United States writ large is more politically balanced: approximately 31% of the country identified as a Democrat, 40% of the country identified as independent, and 25% of the country identified as a Republican.²

Figure 2: Political Leanings of Respondents

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As for electoral participation, the majority of respondents indicated that they are active voters. Approximately 57% of respondents voted in Federal, State and Local elections in 2016 and 2018, which is on par with local\textsuperscript{3} and national\textsuperscript{4} trends. Meanwhile, 33% of voters indicated that they did not vote at all in 2016 and 2018. Unfortunately, we cannot ascertain as to why these voters did not participate in the voting process. Possible reasons include, but are not limited to: being too young to vote during either and/or both of the election cycles, being a D.C. resident and not being eligible to vote in State elections, being a non-U.S. citizen, etc.

In the future, it may be of benefit to the study to directly ask whether or not a person was eligible to vote or to indirectly ask (e.g. capture the respondent’s age, citizenship status, etc.) to eliminate this potential measurement error in the data.

Nearly 71% of respondents indicated that they have some level of influence on policy, 18% of that being in their professional life and 54% of that being in their social life. Given D.C’s reputation of being a political town, this was relatively surprising. However, it’s possible that the answer to this question was influenced by the demographics of those in attendance at Salon discussions. For example, a retired individual or a college student may not have the ability to influence policy professionally as they do not have a job.


Moving forward, it would be of benefit to future evaluations to capture demographic information (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, etc.) in order to shed further light into these nuances and others. For example, in light of the Black Lives Matter movement which is calling for change across all sectors in the U.S., it may be appropriate to include identifying questions tied to racial and ethnic identity in order to best understand with whom the content on the stage and of the discussion may or may not resonate as well as whether or not all racial groups are attending the events.

It would also be beneficial to understand the general theater attendance habits of respondents. For example, asking a question related to their status as a season-subscriber or an individual ticket buyer may be fruitful as would insights as to whether or not the Salon motivated their ticket purchase on a certain date.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Theater & Policy Salon discussion events are attended by left-leaning active voters who believe they can influence policy through their professional and personal lives. The pilot process displays that the program is meeting a need within the community of theater audiences. To safeguard this success while the program considers its path to further impact, we recommend the following:

Considered and Deliberate Marketing Strategies

- As attendees may be drawn to certain topics over others, explicit and thematic marketing strategies, potentially for a series of plays and performances, would help build audiences. Might attendees be willing and able to purchase the 3-play package of plays about immigration, for example?

- Rather than couch the discussion themes in the rich language of the Salon, it would be beneficial to market the events under easily recognizable tags (e.g. immigration, race relations, abortion, gun-rights, etc.). These language cues are essential in digital communications where message length is synonymous with message effectiveness and efficiency.

- While the term “Salon” may entice and excite certain audience members, it may alienate others. For example, consider the policy novice who may not be as literate on the topic as their older counterparts. Better yet, consider the theater newcomer who was drawn to the performance due to their ties to the content of the play. Would the talkback setting disarm them? Or are there other ways to engage the audience throughout their theater going experience (like submitting answers to a thought-provoking question about the play on a public bulletin board at the intermission), that could drive dialogue and participation in post-show events?

- It would benefit the process to be as explicit as possible about the Salon discussion following the play through communications like pre-show announcements, program inserts, etc. This may increase attendance numbers, allowing for stronger data collection and richer discussion.

- Finally, as was witnessed with the Salon held with NYU, it would benefit the program to take advantage of additional educational partnerships, making policy issues and the arts more accessible, and perhaps even more approachable, to young people.

Evolution of Evaluation Tools

- To collect stronger findings, it would benefit future Salon evaluations to not only collect responses at the end of the experience, but at the beginning as well. Though there would be a drop-off in participation, this would capture the evolution of sentiments towards the topic and the experience as the evening went on.
Evaluation tools are beginning to embrace more participatory and interactive mediums than traditional surveys. To encourage varied, and potentially more frequent, interaction, it may benefit Theater & Policy Salon to consider synthesis activities beyond the typical survey and talk-back setting. For example, Woolly Mammoth has found great success in their lobby displays.

These recommendations are offered in the hopes of facilitating future success for the Theater & Policy Salon program.
APPENDIX A: Responses to Individual Questions

Below are graphical representations of responses to the first seven questions of the Theater & Policy Salon Discussion survey.

*Figure 5: The policy themes resonate with me on a personal level or with my work.*

*Figure 6: I understand the strong ideas expressed in the play and discussion.*
Figure 7: The policy themes resonate with me on a personal level or with my work.

Figure 8: I am better able to explore the openness or fluidity of the inherent contradictions in this policy theme.
Figure 9: I understand the policy theme better because of the creative exploration of the play.

Figure 10: I now see hidden or new perspectives about the policy theme.
Figure 11: I believe my emotions about the theme are connected to logical beliefs about policy.
APPENDIX B: Evaluation Survey

Below, Appendix B is a copy of the Theater and Policy Salon Evaluation Survey, which was distributed to all audience members who attended the talkbacks.

Please circle (1) number to indicate your level of agreement with the statement, with 1 being low and 5 being high.

I understand the policy theme better because of the creative exploration of the play.

1 2 3 4 5

I feel a part of a collective dialogue, beyond my own individual perspective, on this policy theme.

1 2 3 4 5

I now see hidden or new perspectives about the policy theme.

1 2 3 4 5

I believe my emotions about the theme are connected to logical beliefs about policy.

1 2 3 4 5

I am better able explore the openness or fluidity of the inherent contradictions in this policy theme.

1 2 3 4 5

I understand the strong ideas expressed in the play and discussions.

1 2 3 4 5

The policy themes resonate with me on a personal level or with my work.

1 2 3 4 5

What is your political leaning? (circle one)

Far Left  Left  Center-Left  Center  Center-Right  Right  Far Right

Do you feel that you currently influence policy (in any context)? (circle one)

Yes, professionally.  Yes, socially.  No, never.  I don't know.

In the last elections (2016 and 2018), how did you participate? (check all that apply)

• Voted in Federal Elections  • Voted in State Elections  • Voted in Local Elections  • Did not vote

Please check one (1) box in each column.

After the play/discussion experience, I feel...

• Positive about the experience
• Neutral about the experience
• Negative about the experience

After the play/discussion experience, I have...

• More motivation to see plays discussed
• The same motivation to see plays discussed
• Less motivation to see plays discussed

What future policy themes are you interested in?

Please contact me about future events and programming:  • Yes  • No

Email address: ________________________________