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TOOLS OF ENGAGEMENT:
THE POTENTIAL OF THEATRE WEB SITES FOR FOSTERING ACTIVE
AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Radio, Film, and Theatre, and Animation

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In Partial Fulfillment

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by

Elizabeth L. McClelland

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THEATRE, AND ANIMATION AND ILLUSTRATION

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2011

Dr. Alison L. McKee   Department of Television, Radio, Film, and
                             Theatre, and Animation and Illustration

Dr. Kimb Massey   Department of Television, Radio, Film, and
                             Theatre, and Animation and Illustration

Dr. Ethel Pitts Walker   Department of Television, Radio, Film, and
                             Theatre, and Animation and Illustration

ABSTRACT

TOOLS OF ENGAGEMENT:
THE POTENTIAL OF THEATRE WEB SITES FOR FOSTERING ACTIVE
AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

by Elizabeth L. McClelland

This thesis explores whether theatre Web sites contain tools that have the potential to deepen audience engagement in live performance. By synthesizing data from a variety of scholarly sources, it presents a thorough and specific definition of engagement (active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection to a theatre company's community, or creative expression) and makes a detailed case that online tools can increase audience engagement. Because it addresses the significance of engagement and Internet technologies to audience participation in the theatrical event, this study is relevant not only to theatre and arts participation scholars but also to theatre companies and other arts organizations.

To provide an unbiased account of how theatre Web sites may deepen audience engagement, this study examined the Web presences of a randomly selected group of American not-for-profit theatre companies, identifying engaging elements and analyzing their features and functions. All of the sampled theatre Web presences contained elements that could increase audience engagement, and these elements offered the possibility of engagement in all its forms—educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Performance Studies scholar Philip Auslander reports that there exists a "strong

tendency in performance theory to place live performance and mediatized or

technologized forms in opposition to one another" (1). Often, Auslander suggests,

analyses of live performance in relation to digital and mechanical media "take on an air

of melodrama in which virtuous live performance is threatened, encroached upon,

dominated, and contaminated by its insidious other, with which it is locked in a life or

death struggle" (2). An example of one of these melodramatic discourses can be found in

online theatre critic Scott Vogel's January 2001 *American Theatre* article, "Surfing for

Godot." In the article, Vogel shares an anecdote that illustrates his response to the news

that Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century spent more time online, less time in

face to face contact with other human beings, and less time participating in events outside

the home. Vogel describes feeling anxious that his work as an online theatre critic,

instead of "[energizing] people with a love of the theatre" and encouraging theatre

attendance, was actually contributing to the "demise of communality . . . the death of the

theatre" (71). After sharing his fears with colleagues, ironically through e-mail, Vogel

was calmed. Although responses to his e-mail ranged from reminders of the practical

value of the Internet for better informing audiences to utopian predictions of the

Internet's capacity to save theatre from marginalization, all expressed the conviction that

the Internet would encourage theatre attendance rather than replace theatre.

Nearly ten years have passed since Vogel's article was published, but the question of whether Internet use in general affects theatre participation positively or negatively remains complicated and is not a question I seek to answer. Rather, I suggest that Internet tools found in theatre Web presences have the potential to deepen audience engagement in the theatrical experience. However, although many theatre companies use Internet tools, such as online ticketing, e-newsletters, and Facebook pages, to promote and facilitate participation, recent reports show that theatre attendance has declined over the last several years. In a summary of Theatre Communication Group's (TCG) annual report on the fiscal health of American not-for-profit theatre, *Theatre Facts 2005*, Celia Wren reports that despite gains in federal, local, and individual funding, audience attendance declined by 5.5% between 2001 and 2005 among "Trend Theatres," a group of one hundred companies tracked for at least five years. Season subscriptions and subscription renewal rates also declined (36-41). At the same time, the total number of performances rose 4.9%. This trend of declining theatre attendance in spite of an increase in total number of performances continued in 2006 and 2007 (Wren, Fiscal and Readiness). A broader examination of theatre attendance by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), *All America's a Stage: Growth and Challenges in Nonprofit Theatre*, supports TCG's findings. It shows that while the number of nonprofit theatres doubled between 1990 and 2005, attendance declined, and those declines have accelerated since the turn of the century.

Researchers attribute the growth in number of nonprofit theatres and performances to government policy and funding that focused on increasing the supply of

theatre; however, they do not link the decline in theatre attendance directly to any single cultural, economic, or technological factor. The Internet often comes up in discussions of the challenges facing theatre, as part of both the problem and the solution. In a paper outlining the major challenges facing the nonprofit arts in California, the James Irvine Foundation suggests, "The nonprofit arts and cultural sector is facing major, permanent, structural changes brought on by technological advances, globalization and shifting consumer behavior" (2). The paper goes on to report that new media, including the Internet, can facilitate both active and passive cultural participation (8). However, it warns that nonprofit arts organizations, which have been slower than commercial arts organizations and individual artists to react to shifting conditions, "must adapt to evolving technologies and consumer demand or become increasingly irrelevant" (6).

Many researchers also suggest that not-for-profit theatre companies must work harder to create demand for theatre, especially in this new, technology-driven environment of extreme variety of choice and convenient, interactive in-home entertainment. Kimberly Jinnett and Kevin McCarthy of the RAND Corporation criticize arts organizations for placing too much emphasis on obtaining funding to create arts supply and argue that more attention must be paid to building arts participation. In their report, *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts,* they outline three major tactics for building participation. The first tactic, "diversifying," focuses on individuals not inclined to participate in the arts and works to persuade those individuals that arts experiences can be relevant and rewarding. The second tactic, "broadening," focuses on individuals who are inclined to participate in the arts but not currently participating and

works to remove any practical barriers to attendance by better informing those individuals about the types of programs available as well as prices, parking availability, dates, and times. The third tactic, "deepening," focuses on individuals who are currently participating in the arts and works to make those individuals' arts experiences as rewarding, or engaging, as possible by increasing their knowledge about the arts and instilling in them a sense of belonging to a community (31-33). Although McCarthy and Jinnett suggest that goal of "deepening" is most relevant to individuals currently participating in the arts, it is also made clear that creating rewarding arts experiences is the key to continued participation by all groups. In other words, if an individual has a positive, or "engaging," arts experience, he or she will be more inclined to participate in the arts in the future.

Although the Internet is a component of the shifting conditions that have heightened the need to create demand for theatre, it can also be used as a tool for building participation. The use of the Internet in attempts to "broaden" theatre participation is widespread (Smith and Blades). Theatre Web sites offer tickets for sale online and offer many additional features that both inform audience members about upcoming events and work to make attendance at those events as convenient as possible. However, I suggest that the Internet presence of American not-for-profit theatres, which, for the purposes of this thesis, includes their official Web sites as well as any social media sites they administer, also provides tools that have the potential to deepen participation by creating more engaging theatre experiences for audiences. I base my argument on the examination and analysis of the Internet presence of a random sample of twenty

American not-for-profit theatre companies. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine whether these Internet tools succeed in increasing engagement; therefore, I will demonstrate their *potential* in increasing engagement.

Before presenting my argument, it is necessary to explore and define the concepts of engagement and participation as they relate to this study. The terms "engage" or "engaging" are often used in studies of theatre audiences; however, they are rarely concretely defined, if defined at all. According to RAND researchers McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks, "[t]hose individuals who are most engaged by their arts experience are the ones who are the most attuned to the intrinsic benefits [of the arts]" (56). Therefore, an engaging experience is an experience which audience members find personally satisfying, and engagement can occur not only on an intellectual or emotional level, but also on a social level. These engaging experiences are "characterized by enjoyment, a heightened sense of life, and imaginative departure" (57). Alternatively, in the conclusion to *Engaging Art*, an anthology that examines the "changing landscape of cultural participation" (Ivey, "Introduction", 2), Steven Tepper offers two definitions of "engaging." The first considers the term as an adjective, which Tepper believes focuses more on supplying great, "engaging" art: ". . . if we are able to produce and present art that is engaging (i.e., attractive, compelling, beautiful), such as world-class music, theatre and dance, then good things will happen. Audiences will be uplifted, converted, and inspired, and the public interest will be served" (363). While not diminishing the importance of "bringing great art to the people," Tepper prefers to look at engaging "as a verb (e.g., to interlock, to involve, or to cause)," which "suggests citizens that actively

connect to art—discovering new meanings, appropriating it for their own purposes, creatively combining different styles and genres, offering their own critique, and, importantly, making and producing art themselves" (363).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will read "engaging" as a verb; therefore, borrowing liberally from Tepper's definition but shifting it slightly for my own purposes and to include the social engagement described by the RAND researchers, I define an engaging experience as an experience that allows an audience member the opportunity to actively participate in the theatrical performance through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection to a theatre organization's community, or creative expression. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to determine whether Internet tools actually succeed in increasing engagement. Thus, in examining the Web sites, I will look for tools that offer audience members the *possibility* of deepening their engagement with the theatre experience through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression.

Arts participation scholars are also faced with the question of defining participation, and several articles in *Engaging Art* explore this question. In "Comparing Participation in the Arts and Culture," J. Mark Schuster examines several definitions of arts and cultural participation and reports that "the question of participation in the arts and culture is intimately linked to the definitional boundary constructed around them; consequently, one sees considerable variation in the coverage of various participation studies" (54). Definitions of participation in studies of arts and culture, he believes, are largely influenced by the interests of the scholar or organization performing the study.

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Bill Ivey, Steven J. Tepper, and Yang Gao suggest that the NEA and the arts community in general have focused their definition of participation primarily on attendance at institutionally sponsored events (2, 35). In "Engaging Art - What Counts?," Tepper and Gao criticize the arts community for pursuing "a relatively narrow concept of participation, one that is more concerned with the health of existing nonprofit arts institutions than with the diverse ways the citizens engage with culture—as amateur art makers, as volunteers, as curators, as commentators, and as donors and members" (43). Based on their research on participation in religion, politics, and culture, they outline several different modes of participation, some of which echo the activities described in my definition of engagement, including attendance at an institution's scheduled, structured events, personal practice and expression, support through membership and giving, and acquisition of knowledge and skills about a subject (27).

In this study of how tools found in the Internet presence of American not-for-profit theatres may deepen participation by potentially creating engaging theatre experiences, the definition of participation in a theatrical experience is not limited to live attendance. This research specifically examines experiences and activities that occur on the Internet, away from the live event. However, I am interested primarily in how these outside activities intersect with the experience of attending live theatre, influencing and possibly enhancing that experience, rather than what they mean as their own separate experiences. I do not suggest that an online experience can replace the live experience of theatre, merely that it can shape and potentially deepen the live experience. Therefore, although it is not the focus this study, attendance at live performance remains at the core

of the concept of audience participation in the theatrical experience established for this thesis.

In my next chapter, I draw from both theoretical and practical literature to further analyze the concepts of engagement and participation, explore how the Internet and new media have influenced audience expectations and experiences of the live theatre event, and examine how theatres have responded to those influences with their online presence. In Chapter Three, I discuss methodology, outlining the parameters for the selection of the sample group as well as my process in examining the Web presences of the twenty theatre companies chosen. In Chapter Four, I present the results of my examination and discuss the features of the engaging elements identified within the Web presences of the sampled theatre companies. In Chapter Five, I analyze how the identified engaging elements may function to potentially increase audience engagement. Finally, in Chapter Six, I evaluate the results as a whole and assess the implications of this study.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

To examine how tools found within the Internet presence of American not-for-profit theatres may deepen audience participation by potentially creating engaging theatrical experiences, I draw from literature in many fields, including new media, Internet studies, theatre, arts participation, and audience reception. In this chapter, I use information gleaned from these sources to further analyze the concepts of engagement and participation, to explore how the Internet and new media have influenced audience expectations of and engagement in the live theatre event, and to examine how theatres have responded to those influences with their online presence. The scholarship in these fields, particularly in the field of new media and Internet studies, is expanding rapidly. Here I highlight only those themes which are most pertinent to this study.

Audience reception and participation literature offers insights into the concept and practices of engagement, which is defined for this thesis as active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression. A theme that emerges in both fields is the importance of surrounding messages and experiences before, during, and after the theatrical event in shaping an audience's experience of performance and creating the conditions necessary for engagement. Although I argue that the Internet provides tools that potentially create these surrounding experiences, the following literature, some of which was written before the Internet was widely used, does not always make the connection between the surrounding messages and events required for engagement and the possibilities of

Internet technology. However, this material serves as a jumping off point for connections that will be made in more recent literature as well as in my examination of American not-for-profit theatre Web sites.

Audience reception scholars Lynne Conner and Susan Bennett study the audience's role in creating the meaning of the theatrical event, and their work suggests applications of the Internet in audience engagement. Bennett analyzes participation through interpretation, which she considers active even when it is privately experienced, while Conner decries the lack of coauthorship in the form of the more public acts of debate, critique, and conversation. Neither scholar specifically mentions the term "engagement," but in their descriptions of audiences that are, or should be, actively involved in co-creating the meaning of theatrical events, they clearly describe an audience that, according to the definition established for this thesis, is engaged.

In her seminal work on theatre reception, *Theatre Audiences*, Bennett highlights the active nature of interpretation, stressing that theatre at its core is an "interactive process, which relies on the presence of spectators to achieve its effects." Performance, Bennett asserts, is "always open to immediate and public acceptance, modification or rejection by those people it addresses" (72). She proposes a model of reception in which audience members view performance through a culturally constructed "outer frame" that is composed of audience expectations of a performance. These expectations may be derived from personal experience as well as any messages received from marketers, critics, friends, and other sources. Bennett's "outer frame" interacts with an "inner frame" which encompasses the live experience of viewing the performance in the theatre,

during which audience members interpret the visual and aural signs presented to them from the stage. Key to my study are her assertions that not only is interpretation culturally encoded but it can also be shaped by information received before, during, and after viewing a theatrical performance (114) and that successful audience involvement requires that audience members be familiar with the codes and conventions of any theatrical performance (105, 112). These points are suggestive for this study in that they anticipate the role that the Internet plays in shaping audience engagement, as both a cultural influence and a practical tool that can promote engagement by providing information that shapes audience expectations of the theatrical event. Bennett's study also provides the groundwork for several more recent studies of audience reception, discussed later in this chapter, that specifically examine the Internet's effects on audience engagement in the theatrical experience.

In her article "In and Out of the Dark," Conner also suggests the importance of an "outer frame," which she calls "surrounding experiences," in creating an environment in which audience members feel comfortable coauthoring the meaning of the theatrical event. Conner maintains that the arts industry must do more to promote audience understanding and debate. The sports industry, she writes, has given its fans the ability to participate in meaningful ways, as athletes competing in amateur sports leagues, and as non-athletes reading and listening to sports programs, debating strategy with friends and co-workers, or sharing opinions on a radio or television show. In contrast, arts audiences do not feel that they have the authority to debate the meaning of an arts event. "Sports fans," Conner suggests, "unlike their arts counterparts, have been given permission to

express their opinions openly and the tools they need to back up those opinions" (116-7).

For Conner, the key to coauthorship, her term for active participation or engagement, is

"a critical mass of surrounding experiences that converge in and around an arts event to

provide useful information, opportunities to process that information, and, finally, a

follow-through experience that allows for synthesis, analysis, debate, and—at least some

of the time—consensus on the meaning of the arts event" (119). In spite of Conner's

doubts, in this thesis I suggest that arts fans do in fact have access to tools, via the Web

presences of American not-for-profit theatres, that potentially allow for engagement in or

coauthorship of arts experiences. Although she does not consider the engagement

possibilities of the Internet, Conner's work is useful for this study in that it once again

stresses the importance of surrounding events to engagement in theatrical performance

and also hints at two important ways that the Internet may be used to promote

engagement: first as a means of distributing information and second as a space for

conversation and critique.

Arts participation studies also provide insight into audience engagement. *Gifts of
the Muse*, *A New Framework for Arts Participation*, and *Cultivating Demand for the Arts,*
all recently published by the RAND Corporation, present a broad examination of the

conceptual and practical aspects of engagement. Again, the researchers who conducted

these studies do not always consider the Internet's potential in their strategies for

fostering engagement, but their analysis of the concept and tactics of audience

engagement informs my evaluation of the engagement possibilities of the online world.

In the RAND Corporation's *Gifts of the Muse*, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks put forth that engagement may occur in many different forms. Audience members, they assert, can be engaged in "multiple ways—mentally, emotionally, and socially" (57), and an individual may experience high levels of engagement in one category without necessarily achieving high levels of engagement in the other categories (57-58). Moreover, they suggest that engagement can be experienced both privately, as in the interpretive co-creation analyzed by Bennett, or communally, as in the more public debate and discussion touted by Conner. More than Bennett or Conner, however, these authors highlight the importance of a third form of engagement analyzed in this thesis— active participation through a social connection to a theatre company's community. Social engagement, as they call it, acknowledges that the theatrical experience is most often a communal experience, and this type of engagement includes active participation through "social discourse" with fellow audience members as well as theatre staff and artists. Social engagement can foster opportunities for debate and discussion, create a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for stewardship, such as serving on a board, fundraising, or planning events (57). Further, McCarthy and Jinnett suggest that some individuals "find personal fulfillment and a sense of identity by connecting with a wider community of arts lovers (say, those who support a particular arts institution)" (28), and I argue that the Internet presence of American not-for-profit theatre companies provides many tools for creating this kind of social connection.

Like Bennett and Conner, the RAND studies stress that for audiences to engage in an artwork, they must not only encounter a high quality work of art but also have the

capacity to engage with that art form. In *Cultivating Demand for the Arts*, Laura Zakaras and Julia F. Lowell contend that arts education, by building the skills and knowledge of "aesthetic perception, artistic creation, historical and cultural context, and interpretation and judgment," is the key to providing audience members the tools they need to engage in, understand, and appreciate artworks (20). Again, they emphasize the importance of knowledge and opportunities for conversation and critique in increasing engagement; however, they also introduce the idea that creative expression, the fourth form of active participation included in the definition of engagement as established for my study, "builds the skills of engagement" (22). They suggest that ". . . creative activity deepens the understanding of achievement in any art form" (22). Though Zakaras and Lowell focus the majority of their evaluation on colleges and public K-12 schools, they also point out that arts organizations can provide educational programming for adults, such as "pre- and post-performance talks, membership newsletters, program notes, and the occasional lecture series and cooperative program with an educational institution" (62). McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks similarly suggest that, in order to facilitate engaging experiences, theatre companies should work to build "individual competence in the arts and [develop] the individual's ties to arts organizations" (Gifts 73), and they believe that arts organizations can do this by increasing their audience's knowledge about their artwork through "special events, seminars, workshops and pre- and post-performance discussions" and instilling in them a sense of belonging to the organization's community through social events (McCarthy and Jinnett 33). For the most part, the tactics the RAND authors describe take the form of participation in live events, but these

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live strategies also point to ways that engagement may potentially be fostered online. For example, the material shared in a live seminar may be posted online in a video interview, historical and cultural context may be provided in online study guides, creativity may be encouraged through online art contests, and pre and post performance discussions can take place on social media pages.

Although the theatre reception and arts participation literature discussed above does not link the concept of audience engagement with the technological tools of the Internet, it does offer several important insights into the concept of engagement. First, engagement can be increased by experiences and activities that occur not only during but also before and after the theatrical event, which suggests that although audience members rarely participate in online activities while watching a performance, Internet tools accessed before or after viewing a performance may affect audience engagement. [1] Second, engagement requires not only a great work of art, but also that audience members have the necessary tools to appreciate that great work of art. I will suggest that such tools may potentially be accessed online. Third, as the definition of engagement established for this thesis suggests, audiences may actively participate in the theatrical experience in a number of ways—through educated interpretation, social connection, conversation and critique, or creative expression—that may occur separately or in combination with one another. As I move forward, I will begin to examine sources

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[1] Although the theatre companies studied for this thesis do not permit audience members to access the Internet during performances, some theatre companies are experimenting with allowing audience members to use mobile devices to text, "tweet," and access online resources while watching certain productions (Lord, Virtual Play).

which specifically explore how the Internet affects audience engagement in the theatrical experience, as both a cultural influence and a tool for engagement.

Although scholars remind us that Internet access and technical ability remain far from universal (Tepper 373), for many, the Internet has become ubiquitous through computers, handheld devices and other electronics. It is not only changing the way people communicate and interact with each other but also how they participate in cultural and social activities. In *Society Online*, a collection of essays that examine how new media affect the various spheres of Americans' social lives, editor Philip Howard reports that surveys show that people feel that "new media technology has allowed them to solidify and extend their social networks and to expand their understanding of cultural, political, and economic matters" (14). As such, the Internet is now part of the cultural context and surrounding experiences that can shape audience's experiences of the arts, both indirectly, by shaping society's expectations of participation, and directly, by opening new pathways to participation. Many scholars have begun to explore the ramifications of these influences, and their work provides a better understanding of the cultural influences of the Internet and its possibilities for creating engaging theatre experiences which allow the audience to actively connect with theatre through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression.

As the Internet develops and expands, it offers increasing opportunities not only for audiences to tailor their cultural and entertainment consumption but also to publish their own creative expressions through new technologies often referred to as Web 2.0. In his book of the same title, Tom Funk describes Web 2.0 as "a landscape where users

control their online experience and influence the experiences of others" (xii) and "a social transformation that has put more interactivity and control of content into the hands of regular users, not just big site owners (xv). His work analyzes the major trends of Web 2.0, including the reallocation of power from large corporations to individuals, the authority of consumers to decide which content they will and will not receive, and the opportunity for individual users to modify Web content in ways not necessarily intended by original content creators. He examines the cultural and sociological implications of these trends with particular focus on how they relate to consumer behavior and how businesses can use Web 2.0 to stay competitive in today's market. Though Funk does not examine live theatre, his study points to how Web 2.0 has shaped the expectations of a new generation of theatre goers and how its features can allow them to engage in the theatrical experience.

For Funk, the Web 2.0 trait that stands out above all others is interactivity. He believes that the interactivity of today's Internet goes beyond people simply interacting with other people online. With the advent of the technologies of Web 2.0, interactivity is about content, context, and elaboration—"people modifying Websites in the process of interacting with other people: posting text commentary and opinions; uploading and tagging photos, creating videos, audio streams, online conferencing, and collaboration . . . (2). Further, Funk suggests that the interactive technologies of Web 2.0 allow businesses to create relationships with their customers that are stronger and more personalized. "Putting tools for expression and personal connection into the hands of your customers is a win-win situation," he writes. "It energizes them, deepens their connection with your

brand and their favorite aspects of the market you serve; it lets them comfortably bring others into the network and authentically vouch for the quality of their favorite items and services" (94). Over a billion people interface with Web 2.0 daily; it is a "key gathering place and expression of our culture" (143); and, to succeed in this new environment, businesses must adapt to the needs of newly powerful and interactive consumers by creating fun and entertaining Web content that can be delivered to mobile devices wherever and whenever consumers want it and by allowing Web visitors to "express themselves, interact with [business representatives], and each other" (143).

Again, Funk does not address theatre directly, but his suggestions for businesses also have implications for the theatre industry, and his call to businesses to create Web sites that allow for expression and interaction echoes the theatre reception and participation scholars' calls to theatres to create opportunities for audience engagement. The picture Funk paints of Web 2.0, a place where expression, interaction, discussion, and personal connection are all made possible, is the picture of an ideal tool for audience engagement, which is defined in this thesis as active participation in theatrical performance through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression. In future chapters, I will show how the technological tools of Web 2.0 have been put to use in theatre Web presences to create potentially engaging experiences for audiences who are now used to increased power and interactivity in their daily interactions with businesses.

As individuals are offered more and more new media tools to create and publish their own content and creative expressions, their expectations of their role as theatre

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audience members has evolved. Drawing from the work of Bennett and other earlier

reception scholarship, Amy Petersen Jensen, Christie Carson, and Li Lan Yong examine

how the Internet is changing audience expectations, as both a general cultural

phenomenon and a medium for participating in theatre. These scholars do not provide

the same specific definition and in-depth examination of audience engagement that I do

in this thesis; however, their work establishes that audience members have been trained

by their experiences with media to seek out engaging experiences with theatre—online

and off—and that tools that potentially increase audience engagement may be found on

theatre Web sites. Although my examination focuses on the Web presences of American

not-for-profit theatre companies, many of the conclusions Jensen, Carson, and Yong

make about the Web sites of Broadway, British, and Shakespearean theatres can also be

applied to my research.

In *Theatre in a Media Culture*, Jensen builds on Bennett's idea that all reception

is culturally encoded to examine how production and reception of traditional theatre have

been shaped by the new media culture, an environment in which media, "the means of

communicating mechanically delivered messages of persuasion that bind large

populations into communities," are pervasive (12). Because media technology, including

film, television and the Internet, is, in her opinion, "undeniably omnipresent," its

conventions have necessarily altered both contemporary stagings of reality and the

audience's acceptance of that staged reality. She writes, "The contemporary audience's

acceptance of staged reality is governed by the constructs that are learned by the general

populace through the assimilation of media's forms into their collective consciousness"

(3). Most notably for my study, she suggests, "The American consumers' collective

interaction with media has created a "participatory spectator" who, influenced by

interactions with media forms, has learned to advance theatrical narratives beyond the

threshold of the theatre space into their own private space" (4). Jensen's work establishes

not only that audiences have the opportunity to participate in engaging, or what she terms

performative, experiences via the media, but also that they have been taught by their daily

interactions with media to seek and initiate those kinds of experiences with theatre.

Jensen examines audience interactions primarily with Broadway and national touring

productions since those theatrical performances are available to a national audience and

are therefore most influenced by media conventions. However, I believe that her analysis

of how spectators' daily interactions with media affect theatrical reception can be also be

applied to American not-for-profit theatre. Audiences for American not-for-profit

theatres tend to be more localized, but they are also exposed to the same omnipresent

media that influence reception by a national audience.

In her description of the participatory spectator, Jensen paints a picture of an

audience member whose "body becomes the site of negotiation between the dominant

media and the smaller but still relevant theatre" (4). She proposes that today's audiences

relate to theatrical performances through intellectual connections and associations, and

"[t]he lexicon for those associations increasingly comes from virtual experiences

mediated through technology rather than our physical experiences" (85-6). She cites the

marketing of the 1996 revival of the musical *Chicago* as an example of this phenomenon.

Because of images and information presented online, in print, in television, and film,

even audiences who have never seen *Chicago* associate it with "fishnet stockings; high heels; a shadowy, noir atmosphere; and a unique style of movement" (84). Audiences bring these associations to the theatre, and their reception of the play is colored by the *Chicago* they experience via the media. Moreover, the availability of intellectual connections to an artwork lends it a sense of significance. Giving as evidence for her claim the continued success of Broadway revivals (*Chicago*), film adaptations (*Spamalot*), and works which reinvent other works (*Wicked*), Jensen argues that audiences prefer to feel connected to what they watch (86). In the current mediatized environment, Jensen suggests:

> Audiences, therefore, bring more to the theatre than an open mind and a warm body: they bring cultural data, mined from mediatized sources, which interface with culture data delivered from the stage. Meaning is generated in the negotiation between the two data sets, and the theatre becomes a hybrid space of negotiated meaning between the ideas projected from the stage by the performers and producers and the ideas projected onto the stage by the audience. (189)

In this study, I argue that, like the other media sources Jensen discusses, American not-for-profit theatre Web sites provide cultural data and information that may allow audience members to make intellectual connections and negotiate meaning in the theatrical experience and, therefore, potentially lead to engagement through educated interpretation.

Jensen also advances the idea that audience members, used to interactive and even performative actions with media in their daily lives, such as voting on reality television shows, calling into radio talk shows, creating Internet personas, and writing and reading online commentary, now initiate similar interactions with theatre performances,

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extending their participation in the theatrical narrative outside of the traditional fixed time and space of the theatrical event. In other words, spectators have been taught by media entities "that they can interact and even perform within a theatrical narrative . . ." (172). For Jensen, performative actions can take many forms, but they generally include some kind of creative expression or conversation and critique, both of which could possibly lead to increased engagement. These performative actions can be extreme, as in examples of fans who create alternate identities for themselves, both online and off, that mirror the characters from their favorite shows, but Jensen also maintains that "other more practical examples give evidence of that same extension of the theatre product into the everyday" (176). Many theatres sell show merchandise, and those purchases are "augmented by digital interactions that allow spectators to experience the show from their own homes" (176). For example, by interacting with Broadway theatre Web sites, audience members can learn dances from their favorite shows, look through cast photo albums, post reviews, watch streaming video, and participate in discussions. All of these actions, Jensen believes, can be viewed as "[the staging of] theatrical narrative into performative acts within [the audience's] own personal space" (171-2), and I argue that, by offering similar tools and experiences, American not-for-profit theatre Web sites may increase engagement through conversation and critique and creative expression.

Also building on Bennett's idea of culturally encoded reception, but focusing more specifically than Jensen on the influences of the Internet rather than media in general, Christie Carson and Li Lan Yong study the effects of British and Shakespeare theatre Web sites, respectively, on audience reception in their articles "Turning

Conventional Theatre Inside Out: Democratizing the Audience Relationship" and

"Shakespeare as a Virtual Event." Although Carson and Yong do not examine audience

engagement in depth, their studies of how theatre Web sites affect audience reception

contain implications for the possibilities of American not-for-profit theatre Web sites in

deepening audience engagement.

Carson focuses on the educational possibilities of theatre Web sites in her article,

"Turning Conventional Theatre Inside Out: Democratizing the Audience Relationship."

She suggests that there is a shift occurring in the relationship between theatres and their

audiences from a marketing and development driven relationship to an audience driven

relationship that focuses on education and interaction with artists rather than marketing

departments. "[Audiences] expect to arrive at the theatre prepared in every sense," she

writes (164). Previously, being able to purchase tickets and view theatre and parking

maps online, was enough to satisfy this expectation. However, audiences are becoming

increasingly interested in learning about the theatrical process, as well as related issues in

theatrical criticism and research (164). "Through Web-based archives, projects, and

interactions," Carson explains, "the institutional theatres are moving towards creating an

ongoing relationship with their audiences which is based on an interest in and

engagement with the theatrical process" (56). Carson's description of this shift is

suggestive for my study in that it recalls the RAND researchers' definitions of

participation building strategies and asserts that theatre companies, using online tools, are

moving from a model of broadening participation, by providing tools and information

that simply facilitate attendance, to a model of deepening participation, by providing tools and information that foster engagement.

Although Carson does not offer a specific definition of audience engagement, she emphasizes education, discussion, and interaction with theatre artists as key components of the audience driven relationship she sees developing in the twenty-first century. In reviewing and critiquing the Web sites of three major British theatres, Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, The National Theatre, and the Royal Shakespeare Center, she found that at the time of her study all three sites offered educational materials on their Web sites, but that the Globe Theatre's Web site was exemplary in providing audience members the opportunity to connect with theatre artists. A particularly innovative portion of the Globe's Web site that Carson describes is its "Adopt an Actor" program, which allows audience members to participate in a two way dialogue with actors as they rehearse and perform at the theatre. Through this program, students are offered the opportunity both to learn about the actor's process in creating a role and to participate creatively by offering the actors suggestions to try in rehearsal (158). Her findings describe online tools that may offer the possibility of increased audience engagement and, significantly for my study, affirm the existence of such tools.

In "Shakespeare as a Virtual Event," Li Lan Yong examines Shakespearean theatre Web sites, arguing that the staging of Shakespearean performance online changes its constitution as an event. In studying how Shakespeare is "staged" online, Yong is not studying the broadcast of live performance via the Internet, but rather how performance is represented on the Web through information and performance materials, such as

photographs, video clips, reviews, interviews, audience commentary, and cast lists. Like

Jensen and Carson, she does not focus solely on audience engagement; however, her

assertion that Web sites re-stage performance in terms of public opinion and allow

audiences the possibility to feel a sense of virtual involvement in the activities of a

theatre company is key to my study.

Yong suggests that through publicly posted audience commentary on the Web

site of the British National Theatre regarding the company's presentation of *The Winter's*

Tale, "[the British National Theatre] stages the audience's virtual production of the

performance event, in other words the play *as* its public reception" (50). In these

comments, the play is presented from the point of view of the audience, rather than from

the point of view of its producers, which Yong considers a radical departure from typical

conventions:

> Published on the Web, these messages not only create a virtual audience
> for the NT's *Winter's Tale*, but stage it to the public view. Whereas a
> theatre audience would commonly discuss its views in private or in a
> limited way as part of another public forum, the audience in its virtual
> capacity, as a community that re-dramatizes the performance in their
> response to it, performs as a public part of it and is thereby folded back
> into the production of the play, at its virtual site. (51)

Interestingly for this study, Yong's analysis confirms the Internet as a possible venue for

engagement through conversation and critique and a potentially powerful way for the

audience to participate in creating the meaning of theatrical performance. In these

forums, Yong suggests ". . . the passive, off-stage party in the theatrical contract, the

audience, gains a virtual stage and voice. . ." (50).

Additionally, Yong's study supports my assertion that Web sites may provide

valuable tools for increasing engagement through social connection. She reveals that

many Shakespeare Web sites emphasize and even emulate the creation of community by

inviting their visitors to "join the show," "join our club," "become a member," or "get

involved" by signing up to receive theatre newsletters and information, gaining access to

special member pages, donating, or even volunteering. Although she admits that many of

the activities advertized solicit actual in-person activity, she proposes that audiences can

feel a sense of participation simply by visiting these Web sites. "[T]he hypertext links

that prompt a mouse-click blur the distinction between virtual and actual participation

between going to another page or the site, requesting regular e-mail information and

joining the membership," she argues (54).

Both Carson and Yong also examine the unique ways that the Internet changes

audience reception. Yong argues, "The electronic medium of the Internet incorporates,

magnifies and changes the significance of [other] duplicatory media by providing an

immediate, continuous accessibility and a breadth of public dissemination that can map

over the performance as a simultaneous event, with a virtual audience" (48). For Yong,

the Internet is unique in its ability to provide audience members access to participation in

a theatrical event at the time and place of their choosing. Further, Carson proposes that

Internet technologies extend the theatrical experience in time and space and allow "for a

discussion with audiences that can begin long before the audience arrives at the theatre

and can carry on long after the experience is over" (56). These arguments suggest not

only that engagement is possible online but also that online engagement, by allowing

convenient, extended access to information and experiences, may be more accessible than more traditional offline methods of engagement.

Sita Popat, a professor of dance and online choreographer, studies how the Internet facilitates creative collaboration between audience and performer in her book *Invisible Connections: Dance, Choreography, and Internet Communities*. She studies dance specifically, but also applies her ideas to theatre. Although the theatres that I study use mainly traditional offline methods to create performances, Popat's assertion that Internet technologies "can support a creative process in dance or theatre" (5) is suggestive for my analysis of engagement through creative expression. Additionally, in her theoretical and practical examinations of the creation of choreography online, she makes several observations regarding motivations for and barriers to participation that will be helpful for my analysis of the engaging tools found on the sites of American not-for-profit theatre Web sites.

Popat focuses more on interactivity than engagement, but "interaction," as Popat describes it, may also be seen as a form of engagement, as defined for this project. Paraphrasing Brenda Laurel, a human computer interaction scholar and a theatre specialist, Popat suggests that a sense of "participation in an ongoing action of representation" is the basis for any interaction. So, for Popat, active participation, which is also the basis for any engaging experience as defined for this thesis, is a key component of any interactive experience (31). Interestingly, Popat notes that true interaction may not be feasible in larger groups, like many theatre audiences, but that in those instances, audience members may feel a sense of vicarious interaction. "Large

groups almost always demand participatory rather than interactive situations. Members

may take part in exchanges on behalf of the group or the group consensus may be

communicated, but individual group members may be unable to communicate their

personal point of view" (32). However, if group members feel connected to each other,

". . . a single individual interacting on behalf of the group can lead to a strong sense of

participation being felt by the others" (33). Popat supports this point by relating a story

she found on the Dance and Technology Listserv:

> You know, one thing I have learned about interactive events is that they
> don't have to be VERY interactive to make a very interactive experience.
> I often tell the story of a woman who came up to me after a show and
> explained how much she enjoyed 'the part of the how where we took part'.
> It took me a moment to realize what she meant, for SHE was not one of
> the volunteers who were a part of the audience-interactive piece we did.
> She means 'WE' the audience. That is, she had felt part of the
> piece_vicariously_. (qtd. in Popat 33)

This anecdote is particularly interesting for my project as it suggests that merely having

the possibility of engaging with an artwork online, or knowing that other audience

members have engaged with an artwork online, may make the rest of the audience feel

vicariously engaged in a performance.

Popat's analysis of what is required for interaction is also significant for this study

as it suggests that lack of knowledge or commitment may be obstacles to active

participation and engagement. Popat notes that commitment from all parties is key to any

interactive experience, as all parties take on a portion of the responsibility for the

outcome of the project (35), and that knowledge seems to be a prerequisite to successful

interaction in the creative process (141). In her experience with the Hands on Dance

Projects, a collection of works created to allow Internet users with varying levels of

dance knowledge to co-create a dance remotely with a group of dancers and a project manager, Popat found that lack of dance knowledge was an obstacle to co-creativity and interactive choreography. The dance artists who participated in the project were willing and able to discuss the project, whereas non-dancers felt daunted by their lack of experience and often qualified their comments with their lack of understanding. Popat asserts:

> Confidence is required to take the stage alongside experienced actors, and this research shows that such confidence appears usually to be fuelled by pre-existing knowledge unless it is presented in a specific framework such as a traditional pantomime where audience members already know the role that is expected of them. The creative role of interactor within a performance situation in which the choices are not predetermined is demanding. (143)

Therefore, it is not surprising that interaction between audience members and professional artists, both on and offline, is most often and most successfully presented in the context of education, which Popat believes "offers a safety net that supports participants in acknowledging a lack of previous experience" (144). Based on Popat's conclusions, I suggest that theatre companies can encourage engagement by removing obstacles of lack of knowledge and commitment by providing educational information online and providing opportunities to engage that do not require a large commitment of time and energy.

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides an introduction to the concepts and practices of theatrical engagement and, in its examination of the cultural and practical implications of Internet technologies on audience reception, lays the groundwork for my argument that American not-for-profit theatre Web presences provide tools that have the

potential to deepen an audience member's engagement in the theatrical experience through educated interpretation, social connection, conversation and critique, or creative expression. I expand on the above literature by presenting a thorough and specific definition of engagement based on a synthesis of several scholarly sources and by making a clear and specific case for the potential of online tools in increasing engagement. Moreover, unlike the reviewed sources, which select exemplary Web sites to support their points, my analysis, which is derived from the examination of a random sample of twenty American not-for-profit theatre Web sites, provides an unbiased glimpse into the broader trends of the possibilities of online engagement in the American not-for-profit theatre world.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

To determine whether American not-for-profit theatre Web sites contain tools that

may provide audience members the possibility of deepening their engagement in the

theatrical experience, I examined the Web sites of a sample group of twenty American

not-for-profit theatre companies randomly selected from the members of Theatre

Communications Group (TCG). I specifically looked for any engaging elements, defined

for this study as any Web feature that may foster active audience participation through

educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative

expression. American not-for-profit theatre companies are particularly interesting for

audience engagement research because, unlike the Broadway theatres Jensen describes,

whose standardized production and reception increasingly mirrors that of mass media,

not-for-profit theatres serve unique local communities and were founded to provide a

"creative alternative to the audience-driven manufactures of Broadway" (Brustein 32).

American not-for-profit theatres balance artistic vision and audience interest and,

according to former *American Theatre* Executive Director Gigi Bolt, strive "to offer work

that derives from both a genuine conversation with community and an artist's

unconstrained voice" (8). These theatres share a mission that includes dedication to

"personal connection" and "a genuine and deep engagement with community" (8). Not-

for-profit theatres depend on local audiences with whom they hope to have

"conversations conceived as continuing not only over months or a season but over years

or a lifetime," and they focus more than Broadway theatres do on artistic and educational

goals rather than commercial goals (8). Although Bolt does not specifically define

"engagement" in her article, the goals she assigns to American not-for-profit theatre—

education, conversation, and connection to community—echo the definition of

engagement established for this thesis (active participation through educated

interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression).

Hence, American not-for-profit theatres are an appropriate sample group for my study.

In fact, McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks, of the RAND corporation, suggests

that arts organizations which aim to present work that is relevant to their communities are

particularly suited to increasing audience engagement in the arts (Gifts 73-4).

Because TCG is considered to be the primary body representing American not-

for-profit theatre (Abuhamdieh 30), its membership served as the starting point for the

selection of my sample group. The diversity of the membership ensured that the sample

group would provide a broad representation of American not-for-profit theatre, and

TCG's membership requirements ensured that the theatres that made up the sample group

would be established in terms of budget, operations, and artistic goals. As stated on the

membership page of their Web site, "TCG member theatres represent a broad spectrum of

aesthetic and cultural viewpoints, organizational structures, budget sizes and missions

and together are responsible for much of the vibrant work being produced in America's

theatres today" (*TCG*). Additionally, TCG members must meet several eligibility

requirements. They must have acquired not-for-profit tax exempt status and a minimum

budget of $50,000; they must provide evidence of "community vitality," demonstrated

through local funding, media coverage, awards, and recognition, and "rigorous pursuit of

theatrical form," demonstrated through number of performances and artist payroll; and they must have been in operation for at least one year (*TCG*).

To obtain a representative and unbiased sample, I used random sampling to select a group of twenty not-for-profit theatres. I compiled my random sample from the list of 462 TCG member theatres as published on their Web site on July 27, 2007. I assigned each theatre a number according to its position on the list and then used an online random integer generator (www.random.org) to generate twenty numbers. The theatres that matched the generated numbers make up my sample group. Reflecting the difficulties currently facing the American not-for-profit theatre industry, one of the originally selected theatres went out of business during the course of my research, so I repeated the above process to select a replacement theatre. The theatre companies in my final sample group, listed alphabetically, are Alliance Theatre, American Shakespeare Center, Arkansas Repertory Theatre, B Street Theatre, Brat Productions, The Cape Cod Theatre Project, Connecticut Repertory Theatre, Cyrano's Theatre Company, Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, Guthrie Theater, Harlequin Productions, Kitchen Dog Theater, Kitchen Theatre Company, Northwest Children's Theater & School, Park Square Theatre, Pig Iron Theatre Company, Piven Theatre Workshop, The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Society Hill Playhouse, and South Coast Repertory. Since Web sites are vast and constantly changing entities, the sample was limited to twenty theatres in order to make this study feasible. In spite of this limitation, the sample group includes theatres from sixteen states, with reported 2007 - 2008 season budgets ranging from $90,000 to $24 million among those theatres that provided budget information. The theatres selected also serve

diverse communities and produce many different performance genres, including works by new authors, non-traditional and collaboratively created works, traditional classical and modern plays, children's theatre, and Shakespeare. The above traits are mentioned to illustrate the diversity of the sample group; however, budget, size, location, community diversity, and types of work produced do not factor into my analysis.

During the initial phase of my research, November 2007 - June 2010, I performed a detailed overview of each of the Web sites of the twenty theatres in my sample as well as an extensive review of relevant literature. I catalogued the major elements found on each Web site and compared those elements across the Web sites of the entire sample group. Then, I compared my findings to the information gleaned from my literature review. The data collected during this initial research phase informed my definition of engagement (active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression) as well as the following parameters for my analysis of the American not-for-profit theatre Web sites.

First, I determined that it was important to study each theatre company's "Web presence" rather than just its official Web site. With the explosion of social media online, theatres now post and manage Web content relevant to this study not only on their official Web sites but also on sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. "Web presence" is the term I adopted to refer to this enlarged vision of a theatre's Web site. Since all of the theatres in the sample group maintain Facebook pages, Web presence refers to each theatre's official Web site, its Facebook page, and any content linked to from either of those sources, provided that it is directly related to the theatre company

(e.g., theatre sponsored YouTube video or Twitter feeds). In accordance with this definition, any content related to the theatre company but not linked through their Facebook page or official Web site (e.g., fan pages or online newspaper articles) was not considered in this study. Additionally, Web content that is linked through a theatre company's Web site or Facebook page but does not directly relate to the theatre company studied (e.g., linked information about related arts organizations and events and local companies, like restaurants and hotels) was not analyzed. While I believe that related outside content may in some cases allow for active audience participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression, this content was eliminated in order to create a manageable scope for this study. Although I reviewed the content of the "Web presences" of the theatre companies sampled, the term "Web site" will still be used in this thesis to refer to a theatre company's official Web site.

Second, according to Dave Lawrence and Soheyla Tavakol, authors of *Balanced Website Design*, purpose, usability, and aesthetics are all essential elements in successful Web design (9). However, in studying the engaging elements on the Web presences of my sample group, I focus solely on the overt or implicit purpose, or function, of each element. In other words, I assessed each element only in that it is present and may function to allow audience members the chance to engage (actively participate through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression) more deeply in the theatrical experience. It is beyond the scope of my research to assess aesthetics or usability, although these are clearly important aspects of

any Web element. While good aesthetics and usability would certainly assist audience members in using any engaging elements, analyzing these aspects of my sample Web sites would require approaches and methodologies that are too expansive to be contained in this thesis. It is also important to reiterate that it is beyond the scope of my research to determine whether the elements I've studied actually succeed in heightening audience engagement. For the most part, except in the case of user-posted commentary on blogs or social networking sites, I do not have access to the information necessary to determine the extent to which audience members use the elements I am studying. To do so would require both that the sample theatres actually collected information about how many users access various portions of their Web sites and that I could retrieve that information. For this study, my goal is simply to identify and analyze online tools that allow audience members the possibility to deepen their engagement (active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression) in the theatrical experience.

Third, most theatre companies use a combination of tactics, both online and offline, to build audience participation (McCarthy and Jinnett); however, my study centers on those online elements which offer the opportunity to deepen audience involvement through the creation of engaging theatrical experiences, defined for this study as experiences which foster active audience participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression. Therefore, some notable elements found on theatre Web sites, including online ticketing, box office information, and other logistical information, such as schedules, parking, and

prices, that function primarily to facilitate attendance were not analyzed. These elements

may remove practical barriers to attendance, creating a more convenient experience, but

they do not necessarily create a more engaging experience. For this study, live

attendance remains at the core of the concept of participation in a theatrical experience,

but, in studying engagement, I am exploring what happens after the decision to

participate has already been made. Therefore, although these elements are extremely

important to the larger goal of building participation and could be considered an

important precursor to the possibility of an engaging experience, they do not fall within

the parameters of my study. Similarly, online ads for live events and experiences that

may increase engagement (e.g., ads for live post show discussions, classes, or social

functions) were not analyzed. Although attendance at such live events may increase

engagement, the online ads, much like online ticketing and logistical information, merely

facilitate attendance at that event.

   With these parameters as well as a working definition of engagement (active

participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social

connection, or creative expression) in place, I began the second phase of my research,

conducted between July and September 2010. This research phase focused on a detailed

analysis of the potential tools for audience engagement found on the Internet presences of

the twenty sampled American not-for-profit theatre companies. Based on my initial

research and literature review and using my definition of engagement as a filter, I created

a list of sixty-six distinct Web elements that, for this project, are considered potentially

engaging. To make the list of engaging elements more manageable for analysis, the

elements were broken down based on functionality into eleven categories: News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, Archived Show Information, Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, Share Functions, Contact/Feedback, Social Media, and Creative Submissions. The elements within each of these categories provide one or more of the types of engagement outlined in the definition of engagement: educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression. The categories are not hard and fast, and many overlap. For example, elements within the Social Media category could easily be included in many of the other categories such as News, Extended Show/Production Information and Contact/Feedback; however, the categories are useful here as an analytic tool and a basis for organized discussion.

Based on the information found in the Web presences of the sampled theatres, the first four categories of engaging elements—News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, and Archived Show Information—are primarily informational and usually focused on one-way communication from the theatre company to the audience member. Elements in the News category include general news and announcements, online newsletters, online magazines, links to outside news articles about the theatre, and subscription e-newsletters. Extended Show/Production Information is comprised of elements such as synopses, reviews, director's notes, production photos, video and sound clips, artist information, PDF programs, related historical and cultural data, and study guides. Theatre Company Information consists of company histories, staff, board, and founder information, building information, and mission statements.

Finally, Archived Show Information includes any online data about productions from theatre companies' past seasons. Elements in all of these categories provide the possibility of deeper engagement through educated interpretation by offering audience members the chance to learn more about both theatrical productions and the theatre companies themselves. Additionally, by offering exclusive, behind the scenes information as well as up-to-date news, these elements have the possibility of heightening engagement by making audience members feel like privileged members of my sample theatres' communities.

The second four categories—Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, and Share Functions—may promote engagement with the theatrical experience by allowing audience members the possibility of feeling a social connection to the sampled theatre companies' communities. The Donate category includes online donation functions and information about donating, including appeals to audience members to support theatre companies, testimonials from artists and audience members who believe theatre companies have made a difference in their lives, and descriptions of what donations mean to the theatre companies and how those donations may be used. Subscription is made up of online subscription functions and other subscription information, such as descriptions of shows and lists of subscriber benefits. Merchandise Purchase/Download includes theatre or show related merchandise offered for sale through online gift shops or, in some cases, as a free download. In the Share Function category are Web elements that allow audience members to share information about theatre events with their friends using theatre sponsored e-mails, e-cards or social media

functions. By giving audience members the opportunity to donate to a theatre company

or subscribe to a season of productions, Donation and Subscription elements may make

them feel like they are joining an elite group of audience members who support the

theatre company financially. Additionally, the online theatre gift shops in the

Merchandise Purchase/Download category provide audience members the chance to

identify themselves as part of a theatre's social community, and Share Functions may

allow audience members to feel as though they are acting as ambassadors for a particular

theatre company by giving audience members the chance to share their experience with

others online.

Elements in the Contact/Feedback and Social Media categories may allow

audience members to engage with the theatrical experience by providing an opportunity

for participation in conversation and critique. The Contact/Feedback category consists of

e-mail contact information and online contact forms, videos of audience feedback, and

posted online commentary. Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, blogs, and other social

media are found in the Social Media category. These elements offer audience members

the opportunity to participate in discussions with and express their opinions to

representatives of theatre companies and fellow audience members. The Social Media

category may also promote educated interpretation by dispersing educational materials

and create a sense social connection by allowing audience members the chance to join

groups or identify themselves as fans of a theatre company.

Elements in the Creative Submissions category may allow audience members to

engage with the theatrical experience through their own creative expression. This

category includes online essay, art, and video contests and calls for audience members to submit ideas and inspirations related to various aspects of productions. The opportunity to submit creative work or inspirations may also allow audience members the possibility to supplement or influence the artistic direction of the theatre company.

Using the categories described above, I tracked both the overall categories as well as individual elements identified as engaging (those which may allow for active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression) across my sample sites, recording the presence or absence of each element and analyzing their features and functionality. The above paragraphs present only a brief overview of the engaging elements found within the Web presences of the sample theatres. As I continue my study of the Internet presences of American not-for-profit theatres and the tools they contain that have the potential to encourage audience engagement, I further investigate the features and functions of the engaging elements described here. A complete discussion of the features of these elements is presented in Chapter Four, and extensive analysis of their functions as they relate to potentially deepening audience engagement is presented in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FOUR – DISCUSSION OF FEATURES

All twenty (100%) of the Web presences of the theatre companies sampled contain elements which have the possibility of deepening audience engagement, here defined as active participation in the theatre experience through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression. Since nearly seventy engaging elements were identified, the elements were divided into eleven categories based on functionality: News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, Archived Show Information, Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, Share Functions, Contact/Feedback, Social Media, and Creative Submissions. All twenty (100%) of the theatre Web presences in the sample group contain elements in at least four of the eleven engaging categories—one (5%) includes elements in just four categories, sixteen (80%) include elements in six to nine categories, and three (15%) include elements in all but one of the engaging categories. In this chapter, I discuss the recurrence and the features of the eleven potentially engaging categories as well as specific elements from each category made significant by their recurrence across several of the sampled Web presences or their particular relevance to the concept of engagement as defined for this thesis.[2] Detailed analysis of how these categories and elements may potentially function to increase audience engagement is found in Chapter Five. A complete listing of engaging elements and their recurrence across the Web sites of the sampled theatre companies is found in the Appendix.

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[2] See Appendix for a complete chart of the engaging elements tracked for this study and their recurrence over the sampled Web sites.

NEWS

Eighteen (90%) of the Web presences sampled contain elements that fall into the News category. News elements include postings of general news and announcements, online newsletters, online magazines, links to outside news articles about the theatre, and subscription e-newsletters. The elements in the News category provide similar content but are differentiated in terms of delivery, format, and quantity of information presented. E-newsletters may be delivered directly to audience members' e-mail boxes, and they tend to summarize theatre companies' current and upcoming programs with links back to the main Web site for additional information. On the other hand, articles posted or linked to online often delve more deeply into one particular topic.

All of the elements in the News category present information about theatre companies' latest events, programs, and announcements. The Alliance Theatre sums up the character of the News category in an online invitation to sign up for their e-newsletter, "The Insider:"

> Get in the loop! The Alliance has so much going onstage AND off! Sign-up for The Insider e-newsletter, our monthly online newsletter, and in addition to regular Alliance discounts, you'll get the latest in restaurant partner discounts, arts news and partnerships, reviews, fun promotions and special events, educational opportunities, acting classes, and so much more…. (*Alliance*)

As suggested by the previous quote, news content includes show and event information, news about artists associated with the theatre company, announcements about the upcoming production season and ticket sales, updates on fundraising campaigns, and special offers. The information presented ranges from basic advertising information,

such as show dates, times, and tickets prices, to more educational information, such as playwright biographies, links to backstage photos and video, and reviews.

The most prevalent element in the News category is the subscription e- newsletter. All eighteen of the theatre Web presences with engaging elements in the News category (90% of the entire sample group) include online invitations to sign up for an e-newsletter. These invitations promise audience members "special offers," "insider news," and all the "latest and greatest" theatre information. The newsletters themselves contain all of the types of news content previously discussed. Generally, they provide an overview of all the shows, events, and programs currently taking place at each theatre company, but many theatres also send more frequent, "breaking news" updates, such as special offers and discounts, late-breaking show and event information, and last minute ads for programs. Users can sign up to receive e-newsletters in just a few clicks by providing contact information and, in some cases, indicating which programs most interest them.

EXTENDED SHOW/PRODUCTION INFORMATION

All twenty (100%) of the sampled Web presences include elements in the Extended Show/Production Information category. Like elements in the News category, these elements are primarily informational. Extended Show/Production Information elements provide both general and in-depth information about the texts, histories, and current productions of the shows performed at the sample theatres. This extensive category boasts nineteen separate engaging elements, nearly twice the number included in

any of the other categories. It encompasses elements such as play synopses, reviews, director's notes, production photos, video clips, sound clips, cast lists, artist biographies, PDF programs, related historical and cultural data, study guides, and other educational content. The information in this category is presented in a variety of forms, such as written articles, photos, videos, and podcasts.

All of the sampled Web presences (100%) include at minimum a brief synopsis of each show they present, making synopses the most prevalent engaging element in the Extended Show/Production Information category. Artist information also appears frequently in the Web presences of the sample group. Fourteen (70%) include cast lists, artist biographies, headshots, artist interviews, or alumni news. Fifteen Web presences (75%) also include linked or posted reviews of their productions, and six (30%) offer their own perspective on the shows they produce through director's notes or other recommendations to the audience.

The Extended Show/Production Information category also includes several elements presented through multimedia. Nineteen (95%) of the sampled Web presences include poster images as well as show, artist, or backstage photos; fourteen (70%) include production and backstage videos; and three (15%) include sound clips from upcoming shows. The photos, often presented in albums or slideshows, depict moments from performances, actor headshots and candids, and glimpses of the production process, such as rehearsals and the building of stage properties and costumes. The sound clips, posted in conjunction with musical performances, present recordings from the original Broadway casts of shows in production at the sample theatres. Online video clips

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provide extensive production and backstage information. These clips exhibit scenes from productions, take viewers behind the scenes to observe rehearsals and meet actors, directors, and designers through video interviews, and reveal how technical crews create the world of the show by building sets, costumes, props, and other components of production. Videos can also provide educational information about productions. The South Coast Repertory's Web site, which has a particularly extensive video section, includes footage of the design, construction and completion of a giant chandelier, a lesson on the "Southernisms" found in the text of *Crimes of the Heart*, and, most impressively, an interactive video called "Dr. Cerberus' Interactive Lair," which allows viewers to explore a video set created for their stage production of *Dr. Cerberus* and learn the history of any props they click on along the way. Another interesting video, from the B Street Theatre's Web site, uses a time lapsed recording to reveal how the theatre's backstage crew tackles a major set change in just a few hours, transforming the stage from a run-down cabin in the woods, used in *The Conductor: Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*, to an abstract collection of gear shaped platforms and backdrops, used in *The Intelligent Design of Jenny Chow*.

Study guides are also a significant element in the Extended Show/Production Information category. Although only seven (35%) of the theatres sampled offer them, online study guides provide extensive educational information about plays and performances. Most guides are twenty to thirty pages long. They include plot summaries, character descriptions, playwright biographies, related historical and cultural information, play excerpts, behind the scenes information about how the play was

produced and designed, related resources, and other educational material. The study guides are often aimed toward youth, but they are available to any theatergoers with an Internet connection. Study guides also suggest theatre-related activities, such as discussion questions, writing assignments, and other creative tasks. For example, a study guide from the Northwestern Children's Theatre & School Web site challenges its readers to act out what they think the pages of *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* might look like on stage, locate the settings for *Madeline and the Gypsies* on Google Maps, and even cook Turkish Delight, a candy featured in *Narnia.* Similarly, South Coast Repertory's online study guides ask readers to re-imagine the end of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, discuss the significance of the use of flashbacks in *A Christmas Carol*, and write journal entries as the main characters from *Hamlet*.

Additionally, new media terminology, examples, and formats are often found in the elements of the Extended Show/Production Information category. The Alliance Theatre calls its promotional videos "trailers," and the American Shakespeare Center's Web site contains PDF files that depict how plays like *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Titus Andronicus* might progress on a Facebook wall. These imaginary Facebook walls include status updates, such as "Hero has a crush on Claudio," "Rome is a fan of Lucius," and "Lucius has called for a clean-up on Aisle 9" (*American Shakespeare Center*). Additionally, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis references modern television shows like *The Bachelor*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Family Guy* in its online study guides and uses texting and instant messaging acronyms throughout. Their study guide introduction reads as follows:

At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast. But we also know that some things are worth slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show. To help you get the most bang for your buck, we have put together WU? @ THE REP—an IM guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions (A/S/L), a plot summary (FYI), biographical information on the playwright (F2F), historical context (B4U), and other bits and pieces (HTH). Most importantly, we'll have some ideas about what this all means IRL, anyway. (*Repertory*)

THEATRE COMPANY INFORMATION

The elements in the Theatre Company Information category, often organized in a section called "About," "About Us," or "Who We Are" on the Web sites of the sample group, provides data about the more permanent aspects of the theatre companies sampled. Elements in this section disclose information about the people, buildings, and ideas that make up a theatre company. All twenty (100%) of the theatre companies I studied contain at least one of the elements in the Theatre Company Information category in their Web presences. The most common engaging elements found in this category include general descriptions of the theatre companies; company histories; staff, board and founder information; building information; and mission/vision statements.

All (100%) of the theatre companies sampled include general descriptions of their company and company histories in their Web presences. General company and historical information fills anywhere from a few paragraphs to several pages and can include photos, video, and other media. The South Coast Repertory's Web site, for example, posts not only an extensive article recounting the company's history but also historical photographs of their various theatre buildings and artistic companies as well as two

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related articles that detail the theatre's history from the points of view of a local theatre critic who was present at the theatre's creation and artists previously associated with the theatre. Eighteen (90%) of the sampled theatre Web presences include staff, board, and founder information. Again this information is typically brief, usually a list of staff and board members and their positions, but it can also be more extensive with headshots and biographies, or historical information about the theatre's founders. Building information is present on thirteen (65%) of the Web presences in the sample group. It provides information on the physical space of the theatre company, such as seating charts, photos of theatre spaces, virtual tours, and building histories. A final significant engaging element in the Theatre Company Information category is the mission/vision statement. All twenty (100%) of the theatre companies sampled post them on their Web sites, and these statements identify the ideas and goals at the core of each theatre group as well as the theatre companies' expectations of their relationship with their audience members.

ARCHIVED SHOW INFORMATION

Elements in the Archived Show Information category include production history lists and archived collections of data about productions from theatre companies' past seasons. Seventeen (85%) of the sampled theatre Web presences include at least one of the elements in the Archived Show Information category. The content of the elements in this category is similar to but less extensive than the content found in elements of the Extended Show/Production Information category. The data presented ranges from simple lists of past productions by date to extensive archives that include summaries, cast and

staff lists, artist biographies, reviews, audience responses, awards, and related photos and video. Also, although many of the theatres in my sample group list productions dating back more than fifty years, the most extensive archived Web information is generally available only for shows produced in the past five years.

One theatre company (5%) in the sample group, the Guthrie Theater, includes audience submissions in its collection of online archived data. Although audience submissions to production archives are rare, they form a significant engaging element because they allow audience members a chance to participate actively by sharing their memories of productions on the theatre's official Web site. The Guthrie's Web site invites audience members as well as previous artists associated with the Guthrie to share their memories via e-mail. The e-mail form asks, "What was your first Shakespeare show at the Guthrie? Do you have an interesting story from attending a Shakespeare play here? How has seeing Shakespeare at the Guthrie affected your life?" Memories submitted are posted on a Web page called "Shakespeare Through the Years Timeline" via a link called "Memory Lane." The postings on "Memory Lane" include memories shared by audience members, actors, and other artistic staff members.

DONATION

Eighteen (90%) of Web presences in my sample group contain elements in the Donation category. Elements in the Donation category include online donation functions, information about donating, lists of donor benefits, online auctions, and links to online retailers who donate portions of sales to theatre companies. All eighteen of the sampled

Web presences with elements in this category include some form of online donation. Seventeen (85%) include online donation functions, and an one more (5%) offers only a downloadable donation form which can be filled out and then mailed in to the theatre with payment. In this case, although the monetary transaction does not happen online, the decision and process of donation is supported by online documents. The Piven Theatre Workshop's Web site also allows online donors to decide specifically which programs they would like their donation to support. Donors may choose between supporting upcoming productions, educational programs, new works, scholarships and outreach, or the general operations of the theatre.

Additionally, five (25%) of the sampled Web presences have elements in the Donation category which offer alternative ways to support the theatre companies online. One (5%) of the theatre companies, The Kitchen Theatre, holds an annual online auction. Items for bid in their 2009 auction included show tickets, museum tours, juggling lessons, and even the chance to give the curtain speech at one of the Kitchen Theatre's plays. Four (20%) of the sampled theatre companies contain links on their Web sites which allow users to support the theatre through online shopping, either by signing up for programs like eScrip and GoodShop or by clicking through to participating online retailers using special links that track purchases and then donate a portion of those purchases to the linked theatre companies.

Eighteen (90%) of theatres in the sample group provide information about donation in their Web presences. This information is made up of appeals to audience members to support the theatre companies, testimonials from artists and audience

members who believe the theatre companies have made a difference in their lives, and descriptions of what donations mean to the theatre company and how they may be used. For example, the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati posts a list on its Web site titled "HOW YOUR CONTRIBUTION CAN HELP: 20 WAYS TO GET US TO 2010." The list reports that a donation of $25 will pay for two underprivileged children to see *Sleeping Beauty*, $550 will pay for one week of gas and electricity, and $2500 will pay for the raw materials needed to build a set for one production. Additionally, donor benefits, including online benefits, such as recognition on the theatre's Web site and access to exclusive online materials, and offline benefits, such as free tickets to productions, invitations to mingle with artists at exclusive events, reserved parking, and naming rights, are listed on thirteen (65%) of the sampled theatre Web presences.

SUBSCRIPTION

Thirteen (65%) of the theatres sampled include Subscription category elements in their Web presences. Elements in this category include online subscription functions and subscription information. Twelve (60%) of the sampled Web presences include some form of online subscription. Nine (45%) provide online subscription functions, and three more (15%) provide only a downloadable subscription form that can be mailed to the theatre with payment. Like online donation forms, although the monetary transaction does not happen online, the decision and process of subscription is supported by online documents. Thirteen (65%) of the sampled theatre Web presences contain information

about subscription. This information includes lists of subscriber benefits, prices and

policies, and descriptions of how subscriptions benefit the theatre companies.

Although subscription is focused primarily on guaranteeing attendance at a full

season of productions, the subscription content found in the sampled theatre Web

presences highlights the idea that subscription provides benefits for both the subscriber

and the theatre company. At the top of its subscription Web page, Harlequin Productions

tells its audience members, "Subscribing is good for you, and it's good for us." Further,

guest passes, which allow subscribers to bring friends to shows for free or at a deeply

discounted rate and theatre companies to reach new audience members, are included in

many subscription packages advertised online. Harlequin Productions calls its subscriber

guest pass an "Ambassador Pass," and they suggest that it serves their theatre company

by empowering the subscriber to help "spread the good word" about their theatre

productions (*Harlequin Productions*).

Subscription is also presented as a benefit to the subscriber. Subscriber benefits

listed online are similar to but usually lesser than those offered to donors. Subscription

benefits include discounted prices, free parking, easy exchanges, invitations to exclusive

events, the chance to meet theatre artists, and guest passes. The Kitchen Dog Theater, for

example, invites subscribers to opening night galas, their exclusive Hooch & Pooch

benefit, and subscriber parties at popular local restaurants. In addition to detailing these

kinds of benefits, the elements in the Subscription category describe the subscription

itself as being advantageous to the subscriber. For instance, the Connecticut Repertory

Theatre subscription Web page suggests, "Your subscription will motivate you to get out

and see surprising and exciting shows you might otherwise miss!" (*CRT*). Harlequin

Productions reports on its subscription Web page, "You subscribe. By the second show,

the money is forgotten, but the tickets are still providing adventure after adventure.

Seven nights out, all year round. It's a lasting gift to yourself, your mind, your heart and

your soul. Don't all of you deserve it?" (*Harlequin Productions*).

MERCHANDISE PURCHASE/DOWNLOAD

Elements from the Merchandise Purchase/Download category are found on three

(15%) of the Web presences in my sample group. An additional theatre company has

announced online that, as of September 2010, an online store is coming soon. Elements

in this category include online stores, found on three (15%) of sampled Web presences,

and free downloads, found on one (5%) of sampled Web presences. Although this

category is not available on many of the sampled theatre companies' Web presences, it

remains relevant as it offers audience members a unique way to associate themselves

with their favorite theatre company.

All three of the online stores sell theatre logo items, such as hats, tee-shirts, totes,

and even umbrellas. Online stores at the Guthrie Theater and the Cape Cod Theatre

Project also offer souvenirs, such as dish towels printed with Shakespeare quotes and

collectible costumed teddy bears, and educational materials, such as play scripts and

theatre history texts, related to each theatre's productions. The Guthrie Theater's official

Web site also offers free wallpaper and Web banner downloads using the logos and

poster images from some of its shows.

SHARE FUNCTIONS

Of the theatre Web presences sampled, six (30%) include elements from the Share Functions category. Share Function elements are usually found on pages that advertise current and future productions, and elements in this category include social media share buttons, found on four (20%) of the sampled Web presences; e-cards, found on two (10%) of the sampled Web presences; and e-mail share buttons, found on three (15%) of the sampled Web presences. These engaging elements allow for the easy online sharing of invitations to as well as messages and recommendations about the theatre companies' events and productions.

Social media share buttons facilitate sharing via Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites, and usually this element appears in the form of a "social bookmarking sharing button widget" that enables the sharing of links on over three hundred different social media sites. E-mail share buttons allow users to e-mail show information or Web pages, sometimes along with a personal message or invitation, directly to friends who might be interested in a theatre company or its shows. The South Coast Repertory Web site's "Invite a Friend" e-mail share button, for example, offers users the chance not only to invite a friend to a show but also to suggest a specific date and time to see it. Finally, a few theatre companies create show-specific e-cards that audience members can use to spread the word about productions. These cards include animations and images related to the show they advertise and also allow senders to include personal messages.

ONLINE CONTACT/FEEDBACK

All twenty (100%) of the theatre companies in the sample group provide elements from the Online Contact/Feedback category on their Web presences. Elements in this category include e-mail contact, encouragement to provide feedback, public audience commentary, and videotaped audience feedback. Commentary published on social media web sites is not included here, but rather will be assessed as part of the Social Media category. The most common element in this category, found in all twenty (100%) of the sampled Web presences, is e-mail contact, in the form of e-mail addresses, for either a general theatre mailbox or specific staff members, and online e-mail forms. Additionally, four (20%) of the theatre companies sampled specifically encourage audience members to provide them with feedback.

E-mail contact takes place privately between individual audience members and theatre company representatives, but two (10%) of the sampled theatre companies post video of post-show audience commentary in their Web presences, and one (5%) of the sampled theatre companies, the Alliance Theatre, also allows its audience members to post commentary and feedback directly to their official Web site, making it available publicly to both the theatre company and other Web users. On the Alliance Theatre's official Web site, previously published commentary as well as a feature allowing Web users to publish their comments directly to the site is posted on a tab called "Audience Feedback," which can be found on the Web pages for all of the theatre company's productions. As of the time of this study, the Alliance Theatre's September – October 2010 production, *Twist*, boasts thirty-six audience comments. Comments range from

brief congratulatory statements to longer, more critical reviews which include both

positive and negative observations. Unlike the videotaped audience reviews, which are

edited by representatives of the theatre company, these comments are posted directly

from the audience members straight to the Alliance Theatre's Web site. It does not

appear that the theatre company publishes only the reviews and comments that it wants

its audience members to see.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media is a vast and rapidly expanding category. When I began my study in

2007 only five (25%) of the sampled theatre companies participated in social media.

Now, all (100%) of the Web presences sampled include at least one element in the Social

Media category. The most significant elements in this category are Facebook pages,

found in twenty (100%) of the sampled Web presences; Twitter accounts, found in twelve

(60%) of the sampled Web presences; and blogs, found in seven (35%) of theatres.

Twelve theatres (60%) also have YouTube accounts, but these accounts are used

primarily as a means of dispersing video about various productions, so YouTube video

was included in the general video element in the Show/Production Information category.

The social media aspects of YouTube in relation to this project were less significant.

On their Facebook pages, theatre companies post information that mirrors the

information that is already available on their Web sites, but they present it in a less

formal manner. Theatre company news, show/production information, theatre profile

information, photos, videos, and educational information can all be found on the sampled

theatre companies' Facebook pages. However, since these elements were discussed in previous categories, my discussion of this category will focus primarily on the social aspects of the sampled theatre's Facebook pages. For example, Facebook members can associate themselves with a theatre company's Facebook page by locating the theatre company's page and clicking on the "Become a Fan" button at the top of that page.[3] The Facebook member's name and profile picture will be added to the group of those who are "fans" of the theatre company, which may be displayed on the page, and a link to the theatre's Facebook page will be added to the audience member's Facebook profile. Facebook members will also receive updates from the theatre company in their News Feed. At the time of this study, the theatre companies sampled have anywhere from 105 to 18,678 Facebook fans, with those numbers growing on almost a daily basis for many theatres.

Facebook also provides ample opportunity for members of their online community to interact with each other and theatre company representatives. On the sampled theatres' Facebook Walls, fans can share messages, photos, and videos and read, view, "like," or comment on other people's postings. Messages posted on the Facebook walls of the sampled theatres come from both theatre company representatives and fans, and they provide informal news and announcements about shows and events, audience reviews, updates on artists previously associated with the theatre, and other related comments and discussions. Much of this information is also provided on the theatre's

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[3] Since the time of this study, Facebook has changed its "Become a Fan" button to a more generalized "Like" button. Users may now "Like" the pages of their favorite theatre companies; however, the function of "liking" a page remains the same as "becoming a fan."

Web site, but here it is offered in shorter bursts, and it is open to immediate public reaction by fans of each theatre company's Facebook page. Fans may express their approval of any posting by clicking a "like" button; they may post commentary, quickly and easily, on any message they choose; or they may leave a new message of their own.

The Facebook pages of the sample group contain numerous fan postings, comments, and "likes." Much like the postings on the Alliance Theatre's Web site, Facebook postings are typically brief, positive reactions to productions and announcements, though some also include constructive criticism and some comments spark serious discussions. Some of the sampled theatre companies also solicit comments from their fans, asking them to share favorite moments from shows, memories of the theatre company, and other theatre-related ideas. Taking this solicitation a step further, the Piven Theatre Workshop enticed its fans to post a message on their Facebook wall by offering a $5 discount to see *Two by Pinter.* Postings on the Facebook walls of my sampled theatre companies also include invitations to informal events with members of the theatre company, job and intern announcements, last minute requests and offers, and even non theatre-related exchanges.

Twelve (60%) of the theatre companies sampled have Twitter accounts, and the content of these accounts is typically very similar to the content found on the theatres' Facebook walls, though it is always presented in messages 140 characters or less. Twitter postings ("tweets") are textual, but they may link to photos and video posted on other sites. Often, theatres link their Facebook and Twitter accounts so that tweets and Facebook status updates can be posted to both accounts simultaneously. However, at the

time of this study, Facebook fans outnumbered the Twitter followers of the sampled theatre companies, with the largest Twitter account maxing out at just under 4,400 followers, compared to the largest Facebook account which has over 18,000 Facebook fans.

The tweets on the Twitter pages of the sampled theatre companies are primarily short informal announcements made by representatives of the theatre companies, but some also contain postings and commentary from followers. Tweets may also give followers a unique perspective into the theatre company. For example, Pig Iron Theatre's Twitter account is administered by of one of their interns who has created a character for himself, S.I.R. (Super Intelligent Rat) @ Pig Iron. In his tweets, instead of posting general theatre news, he shares his day-to-day experiences as a theatre intern. On April 5, 2010, he posted, "Off to Washington, DC to root for Dito, Steve Cuiffo and James at the Helen Hayes Awards. Make me proud, Pig Iron!" Later, on August 6, 2010, he posted, "Cleaning day in the office! I'm finding all sorts of interesting and cool stuff. What ARE floppy disks, anyway?" (*Twitter*). Additionally, American Shakespeare Center has three different "tweeters" associated with their theatre. All three are part of the education department, and their tweets include updates on the creation of study guides as well as casual musings on iambic pentameter. For instance, on August 4, 2010, American Shakespeare Center's Education Resources Manager, Cass Morris tweeted, "Weird thing I noticed today: A lot of 3.1 of Comedy of Errors is written in hexameter or even heptameter. Huh! How odd" (*Twitter*).

Seven (35%) of the theatre companies in my sample group administer blogs. These blogs provide in-depth production information and theatre news and may also allow audience commentary. The tone of the blogs is informal and friendly, and blog content includes theatre news, event announcements, traffic alerts, backstage information, educational information, artist interviews, musings on the general state of theatre, and photos and video from rehearsals and production. Most blogs have some kind of commentary enabled, which is either posted directly to the blog page or, in some cases, e-mailed to the theatre, and the blogs offer their readers new and varied perspectives into the operations of a theatre. The "Big Blue Blog" on the Guthrie Theater's Web site includes recurring entries by actors from current productions, providing readers a glimpse of an actor's experience in preparing a show. Additionally, the American Shakespeare Center Web site hosts blogs written by both its education department and its interns. Their education blogs explore both academic and practical issues that arise in staging, studying, and viewing Shakespeare's plays, and they provide discussion questions and invite reader commentary. On the other hand, their intern blog, written by several participating interns, informally reveals the behind-the-scenes experiences of a theatre intern. In this blog, interns discuss meetings with theatre designers, describe their research projects, and reflect on what they are learning during their internship.

CREATIVE SUBMISSIONS

Elements of the Creative Submissions category can be found on four (20%) of the sampled theatre Web presences. Elements in this category include online essay, art, and

video contests and calls for audience members to submit ideas and inspirations related to various aspects of productions. As a side note, several theatre Web sites contain information on script submission, but submissions are often restricted to authors who have literary representation or previous publishing credits, and many theatres do not accept online submissions. Since very few people in a general audience would meet the author requirements, and since many theatres do not accept online submissions, script submission elements will not be analyzed.

Creative Submissions are often solicited through contests, and two theatre companies (10%) include within their Web presences essay, art, or video contests. Interested parties can submit their entries online, and selected entries are posted on theatres' Web sites as part of their promotional materials and/or educational information. The South Coast Repertory, for example, recently hosted an online essay contest for its younger audience members. Students were invited to write brief essays about their favorite experience after attending a South Coast Repertory performance. The winning essay was posted in "Stage Door," their blog, along with a photo of the winning entrant. Similarly, BRAT Productions' Web site invited its audience members to submit artwork and video inspired by their production *Haunted Poe*. Artwork entries were required to be presented in a format that could be sent electronically, winning artists received free play tickets, and their artwork was featured in an online gallery. BRAT Productions' *Haunted Poe* video contest was open to the first fifty videographers to sign up online. Those videographers were invited to a dress rehearsal to shoot footage. Completed videos were

submitted online, and the winning video was posted to the *Haunted Poe* Web page and featured in publicity related to the show and contest.

Four (20%) of the sampled theatre companies also invite audience members to submit their ideas and inspirations in relation to productions. For instance, The Pig Iron Theatre Company's Web site asked its audience members to submit ideas for cabaret performances for their 2010 "For the Love of Pig Iron" fundraiser. Additionally, when South Coast Repertory produced *The Happy Ones*, set in Orange County in 1975, it asked its blog readers, "What did YOUR Orange County Look Like in 1975?" Readers who lived in Orange County in the 1970s were asked to "[h]elp us get into the spirit of the show by digging through your old photos from that era and sending us a digital image of your favorite shot of your family in 1970s OC." All submitted photos were posted in an online slideshow, and some were included in lobby displays during performances. The photos were also intended to "help get everyone into that 1970's groove" (*South Coast Repertory*). Similarly, the Alliance Theatre asked its blog readers to submit favorite personal Christmas stories prior to a 2007 production of *A Christmas Carol*. Selected stories were posted online to help readers get into the Christmas spirit.

In sum, all (100%) of the sample theatres provide tools on their Web presences which have the possibility of deepening audience engagement. Potentially engaging elements from the Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, Contact/Feedback, and Social Media Categories can be found within all (100%) of the Web presences. The Donation, News, and Archived Show Information categories appear in most of the Web presences, nineteen (95%), eighteen (90%), and

seventeen (85%) respectively.   Subscription elements are available on thirteen (65%) of the sampled Web presences, and Share Functions are available on six (30%). Finally, elements in the Merchandise Purchase/Download and Creative Submissions categories occur on just four (20%) of the sampled Web presences. In Chapter Five, I will analyze how these categories and elements may function to increase engagement.

CHAPTER FIVE - ANALYSIS OF FUNCTION

As discussed in Chapter Four, all twenty (100%) of the American not-for-profit theatre companies sampled contain elements within their Web presences that have the potential to increase audience engagement. These engaging elements were split into eleven categories based on features and functionality. In this chapter, I explore more deeply how elements in each category may function to increase engagement, defined for the purposes of this thesis as active participation in the theatre experience through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression.

Based on the information found in the Web presences of the sample theatre group, the elements in the first four engaging categories—News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, and Archived Show Information—function primarily to provide information about various aspects of theatrical productions and the theatre companies producing them. Many scholars and theatre practitioners stress that the kinds of information found in these categories can be important tools for engagement in the theatrical experience (Tepper; Conner; Popat; Carson; Zakaras and Lowell; McCarthy and Jinnett; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras and Brooks; Erickson; Brown). Lynn Conner points out that ". . . to realize the full potential of experiencing an arts event, the audience member must possess two qualities: the authority to participate in the process of coauthoring meaning; and the tools to do so effectively" ("In and Out" 114). For Conner, "useful information" as well as opportunities to process and debate that

information are key tools in realizing that potential. As Zakaras and Lowell put it, "Relevant factual knowledge is essential to understanding and appreciating art forms and specific works of art" (22). Knowledge not only allows audience members the chance to actively participate in the theatrical experience through educated interpretation but also can serve to promote engagement through conversation and critique and creative expression. Sita Popat links knowledge to an individual's willingness and ability to discuss and participate in the artistic process in her study of online creative collaboration (141). Communication, she writes, "is limited by the individual's vocabulary and knowledge of the subject under discussion" (43). Further, knowledge and information, particularly when presented as privileged knowledge, can create for audience members a sense of social connection with a particular institution or by making them feel like an "insider." Knowledge of a production's creative process, plot, or performers gleaned from media sources can instill in audience members a sense that they have "a special and unique connection to the performance" (Jensen 15). Finally, knowledge can promote theatrical engagement before, during, and after a theatrical experience by giving audience members the tools to interpret productions and to participate in post-production reflection, conversation, and critique (Bennett; Lord; Conner; Popat; Brown). Therefore, it can be asserted that the elements in the News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, and Archived Show Information categories, though primarily functioning to provide the tools necessary for educated interpretation, have the potential to promote engagement in all its forms—educated interpretation, conversation

and critique, social connection, and creative expression—by possibly increasing audience members' knowledge of theatrical productions and theatre companies.

The Extended Show/Production Information category stands out from the other "informational" categories in terms of the amount of information available to audience members as well as the recurrence of several elements across many of the sampled theatre Web sites, and it seems to have the most potential to increase audience engagement. Online Extended Show/Production Information elements identified in the sampled theatre Web presences, such as synopses, reviews, director's notes, production photos, video, and sound bytes, artist information, PDF programs, related historical and cultural data, and study guides, may offer audience members the opportunity to review detailed historical, cultural, thematic, and backstage information about play texts and productions. In general, the information in this category has an educational tone, and thus has the potential to increase engagement by providing the tools necessary for educated interpretation. Additionally, the elements in this category may also lay the groundwork for participation in conversation and critique and creative expression and may make audience members feel as though they are "insiders" who have received privileged information.

Many scholars emphasize the importance of preparing an audience to interpret a show. Lynne Conner, for example, describes ancient Greek theatre as an ideal model for coauthorship, which is the term she has applied to the concept of active participation that I call engagement. For ancient Greek audiences, she suggests, "[t]he function of interpretation was understood as both a cultural duty and a cultural right; that is to say,

that arts meaning could and should only be discerned through a thorough interpretive

process that by definition included the audience's perspective" (107). Moreover,

audiences were not expected to understand the meaning of plays simply by watching

them, and playwrights were required to explain the plot and themes of their plays prior to

their presentation (107). Zakaras and Lowell underscore the importance of historical and

cultural context to the understanding of works of art in their report *Cultivating Demand*

for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy. They write:

> It is often necessary to acquire some knowledge of the historical evolution
> of artistic practice in order to understand the full dimensions of an
> individual piece . . . As experts in aesthetic education emphasize, the
> function of historical and cultural knowledge is to provide individuals with
> new and more-sensitive points of contact with works of art. (23)

Further, Steven J. Tepper suggests that allowing audiences to "see behind the curtain"

can also deepen engagement. Audiences, he believes, are interested in the creative

process, and presenting art in its final form ignores the interest they have in what happens

backstage (381).

All of the elements in the Extended Show/Production Information section are

well-suited to providing these types of information—thematic, historical, cultural, and

backstage. For example, synopses and director's notes may serve to prepare an audience

to view a show by explaining the plot and themes of a text and also by detailing the

audience's role in the experience and shaping their expectations of what they are to see.

Sometimes, this information is presented informally, as in the following "Show Rating"

from Harlequin Productions' Web page for *The Taming of the Shrew*:

> Warning: Real. Live. Theater. Rated: PDF (Pretty Dang Funny). Laughter
> may be hazardous to your health. Includes gunshots, hog tying, fake

violence, original songs, caterwauling, Shakespearean insults, Shakespearean jokes, cowboy jokes, and maybe a boy in boxer shorts. Not recommended for most people under six, honorary members of the Politically Correct Police, or anyone who believes that Shakespeare should only be performed in doublets and pumpkin pants. (*Harlequin Productions*)

Alternatively, the information can be presented more formally, as in the following online

director's note for *Othello*, found on the Web site of the American Shakespeare Center:

In a word, I think Othello is "powerful"…and "sexy"…wait, that's two words. I think it can "play" like a runaway locomotive going downhill that picks up more and more speed before it jumps the tracks and leaves characters decimated and dead and audiences shocked and rocked in its wake. I also think it's a funnier play than most people realize, not including the character named "Clown" who's often cut out of productions (we won't be cutting the Clown). The humor breathes more when you leave the lights on and talk to the audience, making them part of the world of the play. When Iago speaks directly to you, he turns you into his co-conspirator. His charm and humor can draw you in, just as it draws in all the other characters on the stage. The humor often helps break the rising tension so that the dramatic power can return to knock you upside the head like an eighteen-pound sledgehammer. I think Othello can be one of the greatest plays ever written/performed when it's mounted by amazing actors using Shakespeare's staging conditions. Come see it. Are you ready to ride? (*American Shakespeare Center*)

In both cases, the content and tone of these texts offer a preview of what to expect from

each production along with suggestions on how to watch and interpret them that may in

turn increase an audience member's engagement through educated interpretation. The

"warning" for Harlequin Productions' *Taming of the Shrew*, suggests that the show is best

viewed with an open mind and a willingness to laugh and not take the show too seriously.

For American Shakespeare Center's *Othello*, the director's note paints a picture of an

intense experience, though not without humor, in which the audience and the stage are

both lit, and audience members may be actively involved as co-conspirators rather than just passive viewers.

Study guides also have great potential in increasing engagement by providing thorough historical, cultural, thematic, and backstage information. These guides, which include plot summaries, character descriptions, playwright biographies, related historical and cultural information, play excerpts, behind the scenes information about how the play was produced and designed, related resources, and other educational material, are promoted as resources which give audience members "everything [they] need to know to get at the top of [their] theatergoing game" (*Repertory*). As the Guthrie Theater Web site puts it, "Play Guides offer students and theatergoers a deeper understanding of Guthrie productions by providing commentaries about the playwright, the play's cultural and historical context and its literary significance, as well as additional sources and questions for classroom use" (*Guthrie Theater*). Study guides also promote active learning by suggesting theatre-related activities, such as discussion questions, writing assignments, and other creative tasks related to current productions.

The online video clips found within my sample sites also provide extensive production and backstage information, potentially increasing audience engagement by educating audience members about play texts and artistic processes and by revealing moments from current productions, giving audience members a preview of the show they're about to see, or, perhaps, a reminder of the show they just saw. These video clips take viewers behind the scenes to observe rehearsals, meet actors, directors, and designers through video interviews, and discover how technical crews create the world of

the show by building sets, costumes, props and other components of production. Video

clips may provide information that is not available to those simply watching the play,

such as actor confessions, backstage secrets, vocabulary lessons, historical information

about props, and other unique insights into performances, and they can promote a deeper

understanding of both the meaning and the creation of various productions. Moreover, as

Tom Funk, author of *Web 2.0*, suggests, the presentation of this information through

online video may be particularly compelling to viewers. He writes, "Online video has

shown incredible power to grab and hold audiences, and to generate a sprawling social

energy of new content creation, rating, tagging, and commenting" (62). Additionally,

Clayton Lord suggests that the use of online video to convey backstage information may

also instill in audience members the feeling of being an insider, or, for my purposes, of

having a social connection to a theatre company. He writes, "Online videos definitely

help deepen the experience of your current patrons. Companies are also creating

interviews, rehearsal videos, slide shows and even clever cartoons that fulfill a similar

function to preshow talks, intimate wine parties and dramaturgical information in a

program—all making the patron feel like an insider" ("Online Video Revolution" 16).

The use of new media terminology in some theatres' Extended Show/Production

Information elements, as discussed in Chapter Four, is interesting in that it suggests that

these theatre companies may feel the need to reach out to their audiences not only via

new media but using the language of new media. It may be, as Amy Petersen Jensen

posits, that ". . . those who wish to connect with spectators (for an artistic purpose, a

commercial purpose, or any other purpose) must use the language or semantics of

contemporary spectatorship. In western culture, that language is dominated by the semantics of mediated messages" (134).

The elements in the Archived Show Information category function similarly to those in the Extended Show/Production Information category; however, the information they provide is typically less extensive. This section, which includes data ranging from simple lists of past productions by date to extensive archives that include plot summaries, cast and staff lists, artist biographies, reviews, audience responses, awards, and related photos and video, may help audience members learn what to expect from a theatre company's current and future productions, possibly promoting engagement by providing information that leads to educated interpretation. These archives may also shape interpretation after an audience member views a performance. As Bennett notes, interpretation is "open to renegotiation before, during, and after the theatrical performance" (114), and ". . . elements of post-production are potentially significant in the audience's experience of theatre . . ." (176). Bennett suggests reading play texts and reviews and participating in discussions as possible post-production elements, but I believe that all of the Archived Show Information elements found within the sampled American not-for-profit Web sites have the potential to reshape an audience member's initial interpretation of a play. Additionally, post-production elements have the possibility of influencing audience members' memories of the theatre experience (Lord, "Making Meaning" 6). Since knowledge of the arts is refined by cumulative experiences (Zakaras and Lowell 23), Archived Show Information elements may increase

engagement by building an audience member's theatrical knowledge base, which will lead to educated interpretation in future theatrical experiences.

The audience submissions in the Guthrie Theater Web site's collection of archived data, "Memory Lane," allow audience members a chance to participate actively in the creation of memory by sharing their own memories and impressions of past productions publicly on the theatre's official Web site. Some "Memory Lane" postings recall actors' experiences on the Guthrie stage. John Carroll Lynch, an actor in a 1990 production of *Henry V*, tells the following story:

> When we hit our first preview, we ran late and the play started almost a half hour late. So when we were in the wings we were surprised that anyone was there. Then, when we hit the stage for our choral reading of "O, for a muse of Fire" and the place was packed and the audience was on their feet cheering and we had to quiet the crowd to begin. Wow."
> (*Guthrie Theater*)

Other postings come from an audience perspective. For example, Linda Wallenberg, a Minnesota English teacher, recalls the same production in her posting:

> I will never forget the standing ovation at the end of *Henry V*; I think it was next to 30 minutes (or so it seemed) that the audience just would not stop its thunderous applause. We who were there with our students experienced something unlike we'll never witness again and felt as though we had made history ourselves. The casting, the costuming, the timing, the amazing workshops for teachers with dramaturg Michael Lupu were unprecedented. (*Guthrie Theater*)

These memories, presented from both audience and actor perspective, allow Web users both an inside perspective into the experience of previous shows and a chance to compare those memories with their own experiences and reactions to the plays, effectively giving them a chance to re-experience and reevaluate their memories of those moments.

Elements in the News category, which include general news and announcements, online newsletters, online magazines, links to outside news articles about the theatre, and subscription e-newsletters, may engage audience members by providing them with up-to-date knowledge about what is going on at the theatre and by presenting the kind of privileged information that gives them a sense of social connection to the theatre. Though elements in the News category offer some educational content and may serve as a gateway to the educational content in the Extended Show/Production Information category, the News category is distinguished by its focus on generating excitement and anticipation about upcoming events and productions as well as offering privileged information and opportunities rather than on instilling in-depth educational data about current productions. For example, the South Coast Repertory Web site emphasizes keeping up to date with timely information in its description of its online magazine: "With our online magazine, you'll be able to keep up with the goings-on at SCR like never before. You'll read more timely articles about SCR's artists and productions, and find links to end-the-scenes featurettes, slideshows and video clips from your favorite productions . . ." (*South Coast Repertory*).

As discussed in Chapter Four, the most prevalent element in the News category, appearing on 90% of the sampled sites, is the subscription e-newsletter. Online invitations to sign up for e-newsletters promise audience members "special offers," "insider news," and all the "latest and greatest" theatre information. This phrasing and the name of the Alliance Theatre's e-newsletter, "The Insider," emphasize a sense of exclusivity and the acquisition of privileged, up-to-date knowledge. Additionally, the

terminology used in the invitations is often inclusive, possibly increasing engagement by giving audience members the sense that by signing up for this e-newsletter, they are connecting themselves to a theatre company's community. Theatre companies invite audience members to "join" their e-mail list, rather than simply sign up, and some refer to their list as an "e-club" rather than an e-newsletter. In *Shakespeare as a Virtual Event*, Li Lan Yong suggests that audience members may feel a sense of involvement in a theatre company without actual bodily participation. She writes, "[T]he hypertext links that prompt a mouse-click blur the distinction between virtual and actual participation, between going to another page of the site, requesting regular e-mail information and joining the membership" (54). Park Square Theatre's e-newsletter tagline, "E-Club: Theatre In Your Inbox," echoes Yong's claim, seemingly suggesting that users can participate in theatre simply by signing up to receive e-mails. Many other news items, such as calls for donors and volunteers, audition announcements, educational opportunities, and invites to special events, encourage audience members to become more "involved" in the theatre company, possibly also increasing engagement by creating a sense of belonging and social connection.

The Theatre Company Information elements from the Web sites of the sample group, which include general descriptions of the theatre companies, company histories, staff, board, and founder information, building information, and mission/vision statements, reveal information about the people, buildings, and ideas that make up a theatre company. In doing so, these elements may possibly increase audience engagement by providing information that may function as a tool for educated

interpretation and may be perceived as intimate or personal and could therefore lead to a sense of social connection to the theatre company's community.

Susan Bennett suggests that many aspects of a theatre's physical space as well as information about a theatre company's history can influence interpretation, preparing the audience for the theatrical performance (135-148) and acting as "significant stimuli to the audience's decoding activity prior to any presentation of a fictional onstage world" (148). By providing information about the goals, history, and physical space of the theatre, the elements in the Theatre Company Information section may provide knowledge that helps audience members understand and interpret current productions. For example, Pig Iron Theatre Company describes its work in its online history section, "In the past 14 years the company has created 24 original works and has toured to festivals and theatres in England, Scotland, Poland, Lithuania, Brazil, Ireland, Italy, Romania and Germany. The body of Pig Iron's work is eclectic and daring" (*Pig Iron*). Brat Productions' company description suggests that audiences should expect non-traditional work and venues, "Brat explores new plays and re-envisioned classics, collaborates with emerging local and national artists, and produces work in non-traditional venues—all while offering one of the most affordable tickets in town" (*BRAT*). Similarly, the Guthrie Theater prepares audiences to be at the center of the action with an online description of the Wurtele Thrust Stage, one Guthrie Theater's three theatre spaces. The description reads, "The Guthrie's unique thrust stage reaches out to its audience. With seating on three sides and opportunities for actors to enter and exit the stage via backstage, an intricate collection of

trap doors and elevators, and directly through the audience, patrons are at the center of the action" (*Guthrie Theater*).

Additionally, by providing the opportunity to learn about the people and goals of the theatre company, elements in this section may increase in audience members a feeling of intimacy with the theatre company, creating a sense social connection. All but two of the theatres sampled offer information about the staff, board, or founders of the theatre companies. Although the information is not always extensive, some sites offer headshots, biographies, and historical information about the theatre's founders. Amy Petersen Jensen suggests that when audience members have access to actors through media entities, like talk shows and other entertainment media, they can feel a sense of having an intimate knowledge of those actors (184-5). By providing information about the individuals who make up a theatre company online, these elements may give a similar feeling of intimacy with the people of the theatre company and perhaps the theatre company itself. For example, although much board and staff information is brief and formal, it can also offer a window into the theatre staff's personal lives, as in the case of the Connecticut Repertory Theatre's managing director, Frank Mack. Mack's online bio shares, "He lives in Mansfield Center with his wife, Sarah Delia, and their two children Jason (six), Rebecca (three) and their dog Chili" (*CRT*). Similarly, staff biographies on the Kitchen Theatre Company's Web site reveal that their Production Assistant aspires to be a pastry chef, that, at the age of eight, their Graphic Designer wrote and directed a version of *The Princess and the Pea* in which she cast her younger sister as "the pea,"

and that their Associate Producing Director is married to "Ithaca's only computer scientist/unicyclist/ukulele player" (*Kitchen Theatre Company*).

Mission/Vision Statements, which were found on all of the sampled theatre Web sites, not only identify the ideas and goals at the core of each theatre group but also reveal the theatre companies' relationships with their audiences. Many of these statements emphasize audience involvement and may increase engagement by making individuals feel like important members in the theatre companies' communities. For example, the Society Hill Playhouse Web site reports, "This century-old building…presents good, entertaining shows. No highbrow, high-falutin artsy stuff here…these shows are not only accessible, but they also reach out and pull you right in, sometimes literally" (*Society Hill Playhouse*). The Arkansas Repertory Theatre's online mission statement declares, "The Rep strives to enhance the didactic value of the theatre-going experience for young and old alike. It will continue to enrich the audience experience by placing its work in historic and cultural contexts" (*Arkansas Repertory Theatre*). The Kitchen Theatre's online mission statement suggests that its theatre, like a home kitchen, "is a dynamic place where important conversations begin—among collaborating artists, long-standing and new patrons, and the community at large" (*Kitchen Theatre Company*). Finally, the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati's Web site conveys esteem for its audience, with its mission statement, "Our audiences are a vital part of our ensemble!" (*Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati*).

A second set of tools vital to the potential deepening of audience engagement in a theatrical experience are those tools that may allow audience members to feel a social

connection to a theatre company's community (Tepper; Jenkins and Bertozzi; Tepper and Gao; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks; McCarthy and Jinnett). RAND researchers McCarthy and Jinnett suggest that the key goals in deepening audience engagement are "to increase [audience members'] knowledge of the art form relevant to them, and to instill in them a sense of belonging to the institution's community" (31). Additionally, "Some individuals give high value to the social contacts afforded by the arts experience, and some find personal fulfillment and a sense of identity by connecting with a wider community of arts lovers (say, those who support a particular arts institution)" (28). Elements in the second four categories identified as potentially engaging on the Web sites of the sampled American not-for-theatre companies— Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, and Share Functions—offer audience members the opportunity to participate in various online activities that may allow them to make an exclusive connection to a theatre company. Through these activities, elements in the aforementioned categories may promote engagement with the theatrical experience by allowing audience members the possibility of feeling a social connection to the theatre companies' communities.

Elements in each of these categories—Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, and Share Functions—include information about and applications for participation in various online activities that may increase engagement. Although the information provided may function to increase knowledge of a theatre company and its work and, thus, may increase engagement through educated interpretation, it functions primarily to promote the idea that participation in each particular online activity, whether

it be donating, subscribing, downloading or purchasing theatre merchandise, or sharing

recommendations with friends, can be a way to connect with the theatre company.

For example, elements in the Donate category, which include online donation

functions, lists of donor benefits, descriptions of the value of donations, and examples of

their uses, employ language that promotes donation as a way to make a deeper

connection with the theatre company. The American Shakespeare Center Web site's

donation material urges readers to "[j]oin our family of supporters," (*American*

Shakespeare Center), and the Alliance Theatre's Web site asks potential donors to "put

[themselves] in the special company of those committed to great artistic performance for

the whole community" (*Alliance Theatre*). Donation content also includes language that

suggests active involvement. For example, the Guthrie Theater's Web site stresses that

donors are "more than observers of our work" and that "[c]ontributing to the Guthrie

Theater is taking a personal stake in one of our nation's most celebrated arts

organizations" (*Guthrie Theater*). Similarly, the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis asserts

on its Web site that donors can "increase [their] relationship with the theatre through

[their] gifts of treasure and time." The Web site also states, "Donors are an important

part of the Rep family and [their] dedication and partnership will help make the magic

happen" (*Repertory*). Finally, the Park Square Theatre's online donation material

proposes that donors to the performing arts "will benefit old and young alike, and inspire

a whole new generation to make theatre a part of their lives" (*Park Square Theatre*).

The potential of donation to create a feeling of social connection to a theatre

company's community is further enhanced by lists of exclusive benefits available to

donors. These lists include online benefits, such as recognition on a theatre's Web site and access to restricted online materials, and offline benefits, such as free tickets to productions, invitations to exclusive events that often present a chance to mingle with artists from various productions, reserved parking, and naming rights. The benefits themselves, particularly recognition and naming rights, which associate a patron's name with the theatre, and invitations to exclusive events, which allow for social interaction with actors and staff members, as well as the expectation of receiving these benefits have the potential to increase audience engagement by creating a social connection to a theatre company's community. Additionally, by allowing donors to understand how their donation will benefit the theatre company, or, as in the case of the Piven Theatre Workshop, allowing donors to choose which programs to support, informational elements in the donation category may provide audience members with a more concrete vision of how they, through their potential funding, could influence the fiscal and creative direction of a theatre, possibly making them feel like stakeholders in that theatre company. As Tepper and Gao suggest, activities such as donating to or joining the membership of an arts organization "reflect the salience of an institution to a person's identity. . ." (27).

Elements in the Subscription category, which include online subscription applications and subscription information, function similarly to elements in the donation category. However, in place of a monetary gift, subscription entails the promise of continued participation as an audience member for an entire season of productions. It is a commitment of time and money, and it may have the potential to increase engagement by

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making audience members feel more connected to a theatre company than if they simply purchased tickets to individual productions.

Like donation, subscription is presented on the Web sites of the sampled theatre companies as a way to create a relationship with a theatre company that benefits subscriber and theatre company alike. In an online letter to subscribers, the Alliance Theatre's Artistic Director, Susan V. Booth, refers to subscribers as both "friends" and "loved loyal audiences." She goes on, closing her letter by assuring audience members, ". . . [subscribers], and [their] fierce engagement with [the Alliance Theatre] is the artwork of which I am most proud. [Subscribers] are the Alliance, and I couldn't be more grateful to be in your company" (*Alliance Theatre*). Additionally, in an online video detailing subscription benefits from subscribers' points of view, Bill, a Guthrie Theater subscriber of four years, speaks of the connection that he feels subscription has given him:

> By being a subscriber, when I come here, I don't feel like somebody that's just attending a performance. I feel like I'm participating in one because I'm here all the time. I know I'm not a cast member; I'm not one of the actors; I'm not one of the folks that put together the . . . stage or did the lighting or any of those things; but I feel like I am part of that even though I'm not one of those, and that makes me feel pretty special when I'm here. (*Guthrie Theater*)

Subscriber benefits listed on the Web sites of the sampled theatre companies, similar to but fewer than those offered to donors, may also promote the idea that subscribers have a unique connection to theatres' communities. Subscribers may be invited to special events through which they can meet other subscribers and individuals associated with theatre companies. They may also receive guest passes to shows that

they can share with their friends. By calling these passes "Ambassador Passes," Harlequin Productions elevates subscribers to the role of respected representative, empowered to promote productions on the theatre company's behalf.

The Merchandise Purchase/Download category includes online applications that allow for the purchase or download of theatre and show-related merchandise, including theatre logo items, educational materials, and other souvenirs, as well as information about that merchandise. These elements may increase audience engagement through social connection to a theatre company's community by allowing individuals to feel a sense of participation in the theatre company or its productions in their own homes. Amy Petersen Jensen, author of *Theatre in a Media Culture*, suggests that theatre audiences have been taught by media entities that they can "interact and even perform within a theatrical narrative and that these actions can extend beyond their passive interaction in the theatre into their own personal space" (172), and she suggests that purchasing show-related merchandise may be a practical way to do so (176). The Guthrie Theater Web site echoes Jensen's claim in an online video promoting its brick and mortar gift shop, relating that its gift shop provides materials to help audience members prepare to see a show and "offers theatre goers the chance to remember their experience long after their visit." They hope that audience members who visit their store will "find merchandise that reflects [their] time and experiences at the Guthrie Theater" (*Guthrie Theater*). These statements can also be applied to their online store, which, despite having a less extensive selection, sells many of the same items as their offline gift shop.

Moreover, the Pig Iron Theatre Company online gift shop suggests that by purchasing logo items audience members may become representatives of their theatre company. Their description of their merchandise urges Web visitors to "[r]epresent [their] favorite oddball theatre company in public with these shirts, available in several colors and sizes" (*Pig Iron*). Finally, by offering theatre-related computer wallpaper and Web banners that can be downloaded for free and displayed on personal Web sites, blogs, or computer screens, the Guthrie Theater Web site offers yet another possible way for audience members to associate themselves with the theatre and its shows. For audience members who may define themselves in terms of their support of and participation in a particular theatre community, the ability to purchase or download merchandise online may increase engagement in the theatrical experience by allowing them to link their identity with that of the theatre company's wider community.

Like Harlequin Productions' "Ambassador Passes," the Share Function elements found on the Web sites of the theatre companies sampled for this thesis are Web applications that may allow audience members to share recommendations about, invitations to, and other messages regarding shows and events with their friends and family via social media, e-mail, and e-card. The word-of-mouth marketing that these functions re-create online is not only highly valuable to the theatre companies themselves, since peer recommendations are considered trustworthy, altruistic, and helpful (Lord "Happy Talkin;" Wren; Funk), but also potentially beneficial to the "sharers" in terms of increasing engagement. The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis suggests in a description of its online share functions, "Part of the fun of live theatre is sharing it

with your friends!" (*Repertory*). Furthermore, RAND researchers McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks highlight the engagement possibilities of working to promote a theatre company, suggesting that "[s]tewardship is often a highly socially engaging form of participation—serving on a board, launching an arts fair, establishing a book group" (57). Spreading the word about a theatre company's shows and events through online share functions could be considered casual form of stewardship, possibly making individuals feel as though they are acting as ambassadors or representatives of a theatre company, and, therefore, increasing engagement by creating a social connection to the theatre's community.

All of the online actions made possible by the elements in the four engaging categories discussed above—Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, and Share Functions—are actions which could take place offline, and, in many cases, are designed to result in an individual's offline physical participation in attending a season of shows, wearing logo merchandise, joining a donor event, or viewing a performance with a friend. However, when an audience member uses these Web elements, the initial decision and action of donating, subscribing, purchasing or downloading merchandise, or recommending a performance to a friend occurs online, and, as mentioned in the analysis of e-newsletters, ". . . the hypertext links that prompt a mouse-click blur the distinction between virtual and actual participation . . ." (Yong 54). Further, Amy Petersen Jensen suggests that ". . . high tech tools allow for extended communication and connection to other human beings . . . (63), and Thurlow, Lengel, and Tomic report that many scholars believe the Internet can "help reinvigorate or enhance existing offline communities (108).

These online elements make donating, subscribing, purchasing or downloading

merchandise, and recommending a performance to a friend easy and accessible, and they

potentially link individuals to theatre companies in various ways—as part of a dedicated

family of supporters or a loyal audience or as someone who represents and promotes the

theatre company—that may heighten engagement by creating an increased social

connection to the theatre company's community.

Conversation and critique is also stressed as a significant form of audience

engagement (Smith and Blades; Conner; Tepper; Popat; Bennett; Jensen; Carson; Zakaras

and Lowell; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks). As with other modes of

engagement, tools are needed to encourage conversation and critique. Tepper suggests

that not only does engagement require "literacy, general knowledge, and a willingness to

speak out and share opinions. It also requires an accessible forum where Americans can

debate art and culture, can share their judgments and ratings, and can connect to one

another around common cultural tastes and interests" (375). The Online

Contact/Feedback and Social Media elements found within the Web sites of the

American not-for-profit theatre companies sampled for this thesis provide just such a

forum, and thus have the potential to increase engagement through conversation and

critique. Although they stand out for their potential to encourage conversation and

critique, these elements, particularly those within the Social Media category, also have

the potential to deepen engagement through educated interpretation, by supplying

information that may possibly build an individual's knowledge base; social connection,

by providing individuals the opportunity connect with and identify themselves as part of

a group that shares similar interests; and creative expression, by allowing individuals to a chance to express themselves in a creative manner.

Social Media is another exemplary engaging category both in terms of the recurrence of some of its elements across 100% of the sample sites and for its potential to increase engagement in all its forms. Scholars and practitioners refer to social media in terms that highlight its potential to encourage conversation and critique as well as a sense of belonging to a community. Tom Funk refers to online social networks as "the new public square" (6); Teresa Eyring likens Facebook to a "neighborhood" ("My Neighborhood" 6); and Clayton Lord suggests, "The Web is increasingly where community is (or at least where *a* community is), and more and more it is a place where people are socializing ("Virtual Play" 34). Moreover, social media may be a forum for creative expression. Theatre scholar E.J. Westlake suggests that social networking can be a highly performative act (25), and Amy Petersen Jensen reports, "Online, people can build the environments that support new forms of socialization, and therefore new forms of performance. In fact, with each post being carefully staged to communicate a precise message, the forms and conventions of performance are required in these new public spaces" (66). Finally, by providing an arena for discussion, Social Media elements may also encourage educated interpretation. As RAND researchers Zakaras and Lowell propose, ". . . through conversation and debate . . . , aesthetic awareness grows in ways that can enlarge the individual's experience of a work of art" (24).

Evidence found within the Web presences of the theatres sampled for this research supports these claims. For example, Facebook pages offer audience members

the opportunity to become fans of their favorite theatre companies and identify themselves as part of that theatre's online community simply by joining Facebook, if not already a member, and clicking on the "Become a Fan" button at the top each theatre company's page. The Facebook member's name and profile picture will be added to the group of those who are "fans" of the theatre company, which may be displayed on the page, and a link to the theatre's Facebook page will be added to the audience member's Facebook profile. Facebook members will also receive updates from the theatre company in their News Feed. These announcements are current, sometimes up to the minute, and may give the fans the sense that they receiving not just privileged information for Facebook fans but also the very latest information available from the theatre companies.

Additionally, by providing a space in which "fans" can interact with theatre companies and each other, commenting on posts, joining discussions, or simply expressing approval of the postings and discussions of others by clicking Facebook's "Like" button, Facebook has great potential in increasing engagement through conversation and critique. The Facebook pages of the sample group contain numerous fan postings, comments, and "likes." Often the online commentary consists of brief positive reactions to productions and announcements, such as "Congratulations!", "Don't miss this show!", "Beautiful.", or "I can't wait!". However, it can also offer a more critical perspective. For example, a comment from Yvonne Hartwig Moore on B Street Theatre's Facebook wall expresses constructive criticism for one of their productions. Moore writes, "LOVE CHILD was very confusing with all the character changes, but

Pierini is terrific. If you do it again, perhaps you could add some hats so we will know

who's talking" (*Facebook*). A more serious discussion arose in response to South Coast

Repertory's musing about the possibility of creating a stage adaptation of the novel

Twilight. Here brief comments quickly morphed into a discussion of the state of theatre

in general. Brianna Beach expresses her disdain for using pop culture to inspire theatre in

her comment:

> I think it's a really silly way to bring in a younger audience . . . There HAS
> to be a better way to make theatre more accessible to teenagers, but I don't
> believe dumbing things down & incorporating pop culture will help the
> theatre world in the long run. We've already got Wicked/Legally
> Blonde/Shrek etc. etc. . . . One thing I like about seeing theatre is that the
> quality of the content is almost always better than what you'll find in the
> movies. (*Facebook*)

Comments from the pages of the sampled theatre companies also showcase

Facebook's potential to encourage creative expression and the comments below show

evidence of fans' willingness to interact with the theatre companies in creative ways,

brainstorming fairy names and Shakespearean puns. For example, while in the midst of a

production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, South Coast Repertory Theatre asked its

Facebook fans to come up with names they would use if they were fairies, garnering

replies like "Apple Blossom" and "Prairie Mist." Additionally, when the American

Shakespeare Center posted a news article suggesting that reading Shakespeare plays to

cows boosts milk production, audience members began sharing cow related puns on

Shakespearean play titles. Tim Hulsey, one of their fans, replied, "I like this thread…The

Cowmedy of Errors? A Midsummer Night's Cream? Moolius Ceasar? And of course, we

can't forget Othello, the Moo of Venice…" (*Facebook*).

Postings and dialogue on the Facebook walls of my sampled theatre companies may also foster a sense of community through informal conversation, event invitations and other special offers. For example, South Coast Repertory, which is located in Southern California, received several responses when it asked its Facebook fans if they felt an earthquake that occurred moments earlier; Kitchen Dog Theater invited its fans to a pizza dinner at a local restaurant; and Pig Iron Theatre asked if any of its fans could loan them a large terrarium "for a secret, nefarious purpose (otherwise known as a "photoshoot") on Thursday morning" (*Facebook*). Kitchen Theatre, in the midst of a remodel at the time of this study, combined merchandise acquisition with social media on July 26th 2010 when they offered: "Want a memento from the Clinton House? BYO crescent wrench and muscles and take away YOUR VERY OWN THEATRE SEAT!! Come by today or tomorrow during office hours, 11:00am to 4:00pm!" (*Facebook*). Coincidentally, one fan who took them up on the offer responded that on the way home from the theatre a ticket to a 2008 production of *Souvenir* fell out of one of his seats.

The discussions created, as well as the information provided on the Facebook pages of the sampled theatres may help build an individuals' knowledge base, potentially increasing engagement through educated interpretation, and individuals may benefit from reading the conversation and critique on Facebook pages whether or not they choose to participate in the discussion. Zakaras and Lowell suggest that discussion, even when it is "mediated through reading and study" rather than experienced live, ". . . offers learners the opportunity to test their perceptions against those of others and recognize what the may have missed" (24). Additionally, in reaction to studies showing that most

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newsgroups function well despite having far more passive readers, sometimes called "lurkers," than active contributors, Sita Popat suggests, "So perhaps it can be inferred that reading other people's messages and observing their interactions on a subject that interests the individual is enough for many Internet participants to feel involved . . ." (39). These "lurkers" read messages, ". . . and may gain a considerable amount of knowledge or enjoyment from doing so, but they do not choose to participate" (138).

Although they use a different delivery method and format, the Twitter accounts found in the Web presences of the theatres sampled for this thesis function similarly to Facebook pages in terms of engagement. Individuals may feel a social connection to a theatre company's community by becoming "followers" of that theatre company and receiving its "tweets;" they may join in Twitter discussions, participating in conversation and critique; they may glean knowledge that leads to educated interpretation from the information in the "tweets;" and they may experiment with creative expression in writing their own "tweets" or creating online personas. As Teresa Eyring, executive director of *American Theatre*, writes, "[Twitter] creates a sense of real-time connectedness to people, conversations, events and performances that you might have been missing. It also promotes a sense of community and friendship with people you might not otherwise meet, which can lead to live interactions" (8).

The Pig Iron Theatre's Twitter account, which is administered by of one of their interns, highlights Twitter's possibilities for providing audience members unique perspectives into a theatre company's day-to-day operations as well as its potential for fostering creative expression. Though this example comes from theatre staff rather than

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the audience, audience members have access to these same tools and could presumably express themselves in a similar creative manner. Pig Iron's tweeting intern has created a character for himself, S.I.R. (Super Intelligent Rat) @ Pig Iron. His profile photo features a large white rat that appears to be conducting a scientific experiment, and his biographical statement reads: "I am a super-intelligent rat (or S.I.R.) given human-level intelligence in a biotech facility. Recently, I began an exciting internship at Pig Iron Theatre Co." (*Twitter*). Both of the above, along with his tweets, assist in the creation of his Twitter character and promise audience members the possibility of a glimpse into the experience of Pig Iron Theatre Company from an intern's point of view. In his tweets, instead of posting general theatre news, he shares his day-to-day experiences as a theatre intern, maintaining his character as S.I.R. For example, on January 4, 2010, he posted, "This plucky rodent is headed to the UNDER THE RADAR FESTIVAL to see the very finest in experimental performance! I'll bring my thesaurus." On January 22, 2010, he posted, "Super Intelligent Rat wonders what Martha Graham Cracker will wear at Hams Across America. Look for me! I may hide out in her hairdo..." (*Twitter*).

The final significant Web element in the Social Media category, the blog, has the potential to provide audience members with in-depth educational information about the theatre companies and, thus, may offer readers a chance at deeper engagement through educated interpretation. Like Twitter accounts, the blogs found in the Web presences of the sample group provide specialized information from authors such as actors, interns, educators, and other theatre staff members, and they have the possibility of giving readers perspectives into a theatre company's operations that they may not find elsewhere. Blogs

can also be a vehicle for possible engagement through conversation and critique and social connection.

Tom Funk suggests that blogs may help businesses create "a daily, informal, newsy and personal connection" with customers (96), and the language used in the descriptions of the blogs of the sample theatre companies corresponds with this statement. The tone of the blogs is informal and friendly, and blog titles and descriptions emphasize familiarity, the acquisition of privileged information, and accessible discussion. For example, the Guthrie Theater suggests that their Big Blue Blog is "[l]ess formal than an article in a newsletter or program (we hope). Less rambling than a conversation over a beer after a show (perhaps)" (*Guthrie Theater*). The South Coast Repertory's blog title, "Stage Door," suggests that those who read the blog will pass through the stage door and enter the behind the scenes world of SCR. In an introduction to their education blog, the American Shakespeare Center writes, "Engaging with Shakespeare's staging conditions makes his plays accessible and full of joy for everyone. Join us in our ongoing discussion about the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and the staging of their plays" (*American Shakespeare Center*).

Elements in the contact category, which include e-mail contact, encouragement to provide feedback, public audience commentary, and videotaped audience feedback, function primarily to potentially increase audience engagement through conversation and critique. However, as noted in analysis of the Social Media category, participation in conversation and critique, as a reader or an active contributor, may also enhance the possibility of engagement through educated interpretation, social connection, and creative

expression. E-mail contact functions and information open the door for individuals to express their opinions and address questions to theatre company representatives, possibly fostering to conversation and critique. Unlike the comments, questions, and discussions on Facebook or Twitter, these exchanges remain private and, thereby, may be limited in their potential to increase engagement for an audience at large. Nonetheless, this element may provide engagement benefits for those involved in the exchanges. Additionally, some theatre companies encourage e-mail feedback and discussion. For example, the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati's invitation for online contact reads as follows: "ETC always welcomes your comments and feedback. If you like what you see on stage tell ten friends. If you don't, tell us. Your opinion matters. Good theatre creates discussion. We want you to think and talk about what you see on our stage" (*Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati*). South Coast Repertory invites its audience to share both commentary and memories on their contact page. They write, "SCR Welcomes and Encourages Feedback. Comment about a play or an experience at the theatre—positive or negative—as an audience member or student. All comments will be forwarded to the appropriate person. Or how about sharing your most memorable experience at SCR?" (*South Coast Repertory*). These comments not only promote discussion but also relate to audiences that their opinions are valued, possibly also making them feel like valued members of the theatre company's community. Videotaped audience feedback gives audience members the opportunity to hear the opinions of their peers and may also suggest that the theatre companies who present this feedback value what their audiences have to say.

Publicly posted audience commentary is only available on one site from my sample group, but it is a significant element in that it allows audience members to post their comments directly to the Alliance Theatre's official Web site. This element has great potential in increasing engagement through conversation and critique, and it functions similarly to a Facebook Wall in that it provides a forum in which audience members may possibly post questions, comments, and other messages about a theatre company and its productions. However, by publishing audience commentary directly to the Web pages of its official site, the Alliance Theatre may give audience opinion more weight. Li Lan Yong, who studied a similar function on the Web site of the British National Theatre, suggests that by posting audience commentary online, on a theatre company's official site, theatre companies give their audience the power to re-stage plays in terms of their public reception (50). She writes, "Whereas a theatre audience would commonly discuss its views in private or in a limited way as part of another public forum, the audience in its virtual capacity, as a community that re-dramatizes the performance in their response to it, performs as a public part of it and is thereby folded back into the production of the play, at its virtual site" (51). Also, the Alliance Theatre Web site's audience feedback function seems to foster audience reviews and critique of specific shows rather than the varied commentary and conversation seen on the Facebook walls of the sampled theatre sites. For example, at the time of this study, the Audience Feedback tab for the Alliance Theatre's September – October 2010 production of the musical *Twist* contains thirty-six comments from thirty-six different posters. All of the comments express opinions about the performance of *Twist*, and, although some posters addressed

cast members or the audience in general in their comments, they do not react to each

other's postings. Most comments for *Twist* are brief and positive, like the following

review provided by Tony Kimbrell: "I was there Wednesday evening, and wow! What a

great show! It's the total package. From the moment the curtain goes up, you're

captivated" (*Alliance Theatre*). Others, however, like the following review written by

"From A Theatre Professional" present a more critical point of view:

> While I greatly appreciated the level of talent involved with the
> production, I thought the musical itself was very weak, and at times,
> bizarre. . . . There were so many odd moments in the production and such
> a terrible book, it was hard to take it seriously. The music was all over the
> place stylistically, given the wonderful period in which it was set. Why
> was the idiom of the period not used more in the score? The staging and
> choreography didn't seem to fit and with each scene the play got more and
> more silly. The Alliance is a first-rate theater, so I have no idea why they
> didn't vet this production and keep it in a second-rate community theatre
> where it belongs. (*Alliance Theatre*)

Finally, theatre companies may also engage audience members by providing them

with tools for creative expression (Jensen; Tepper and Gao; Jenkins and Bertozzi;

Swerdlow; Tepper; Zakaras and Lowell). Elements in the Creative Submissions

category, online essay, art, and video contests and calls for audience members to submit

ideas and inspirations related to various aspects of productions, are the elements from the

sample group which are focused primarily on encouraging this type of engagement. By

giving audience members the opportunity to submit their own artistic work and ideas,

Creative Submissions elements may foster engagement through creative expression.

Moreover, Zakaras and Lowell write that by allowing individuals to experience the

process of artistic creation, "creative activity deepens the understanding of achievement

in any art form" (22). This statement suggests that the activities made possible by the

Creative Submissions category may also provide knowledge that can possibly encourage engagement through educated interpretation.

Media scholars Henry Jenkins and Vanessa Bertozzi suggest that arts organizations need to keep up with the changing culture of the arts in the United States, which is "moving away from a world where a few gifted artists produced works that would be consumed and admired by many to a world where many are producing works that can be circulated among smaller niche publics" (176). They report that young people, who have grown up with easy access to the creative tools of new media, "are passionate about emerging forms of expression" (177), and in detailing many ways, online and offline, that arts organizations may foster engagement in the arts through creative expression, they propose that "[arts institutions] can offer Web sites and exhibitions that showcase the best works that are produced and in this way can call greater public attention to the creative expression of this emerging generation of artists" (191-2). The online essay, art, and video contests found within the Web presences of my sample theatre group potentially function as such a showcase. BRAT Productions featured the work of its *Haunted Poe* video contest winner in online publicity materials for the show. It also exhibited winning *Haunted Poe* artworks in an online gallery. Also, the winning essay from South Coast Repertory's writing contest was published in the theatre's "Stage Door" blog.

Audience submitted ideas and inspirations can also be publicly posted online. For example, when South Coast Repertory asked its blog readers to submit photos of Orange County, CA in 1975, they displayed all of the submissions in an online slideshow on their

Web site and exhibited select submissions in lobby displays during performances. These submitted photos were intended to "help get everyone into that 1970's groove" (*South Coast Repertory*), and may possibly have influenced the artistic design of the production by providing inspiration for the theatre's creative staff. At the very least, the creative works and ideas of the audience, when published online, are like the publicly posted online audience review and comments discussed previously in that they are "folded back into the production of the play, at its virtual site" (Yong 51). Moreover, Jenkins and Bertozzi suggest that in a participatory culture, "[n]ot every member needs to contribute, but all need to feel that they are free to contribute" (174), inferring, as Popat did in *Invisible Connections*, that it is possible for audiences to feel a sense of vicarious involvement (32-33). In that way, the elements in the Creative Submissions category may have the potential to deepen engagement not only for those who submit their own creative expression but also for those who know that they have the opportunity to submit their creative ideas and work.

It is interesting to note that the potentially engaging categories that were found on all or most of the sampled theatre Web sites function primarily to increase engagement in three of its forms—educated interpretation, social connection, and conversation and critique. Extended Show/Production Information and Theatre Company Information, found on 100% of the sampled Web presences, and News and Archived Show Information, found on 90% and 85% of the sampled Web presences, respectively, function principally to provide audience members with educational and privileged information that may lead to engagement through educated interpretation and social

connection. Donation, found on 95% of theatre Web presences, functions to facilitate an online activity that has the potential to increase engagement through social connection. Social Media and Contact/Feedback, both found on 100% of the sampled Web presences, function mainly to provide the opportunity for discussion between members of a theatre community, thereby possibly fostering engagement through social connection and conversation and critique.

Informational categories—Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, News, and Archived Show Information—may indirectly influence creative expression by increasing an individual's knowledge base and making that individual more comfortable participating in artistic creation (Popat), and Social Media elements may offer individuals the opportunity to express themselves in a creative manner (Jensen). However, the category which functions chiefly to provide the opportunity for engagement through creative expression, Creative Submissions, is only found on 20% of the sampled Web presences. This may infer, as Jenkins and Bertozzi suggest, that traditional theatre companies have not kept up with the cultural and technological changes that allow for increased participation in artistic expression (176). Alternatively, engagement in the theatrical experience through creative expression may currently be better-suited to offline activities. Though ultimately ads for offline experiences were not included in the parameters for this study, initial research into the sampled theatre companies showed that eleven theatre companies (55%) used their Web sites to advertise live theatre-related classes, addressing areas such as acting and playwriting, that could potentially foster engagement through creative expression.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the elements identified on the Web sites of the sampled group of American not-for-profit theatre companies function to provide the possibility engagement in all its forms—educated interpretation, social connection, conversation and critique, and creative expression.

CHAPTER SIX – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Web presences of American not-for-profit theatre companies provide many tools that may potentially deepen audience engagement—active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression—in the theatrical experience. Based on an examination of a sample group of twenty American not-for-profit theatre Web presences, I identified sixty-six potentially engaging Web elements and split these elements into eleven categories—News, Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, Archived Show Information, Donation, Subscription, Merchandise Purchase/Download, Share Functions, Contact/Feedback, Social Media, and Creative Submissions—for discussion and analysis. All twenty (100%) of the theatre Web presences sampled for this study contained elements in at least four of the eleven engaging categories. One (5%) included elements in just four categories; sixteen (80%) included elements in six to nine categories; and three (15%) included elements in all but one of the engaging categories. The most prevalent categories, found on 100% of the sampled Web presences, included Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, Donation, and Social Media. These categories were followed closely by News, found on 95% of theatre Web presences, Donation, found on 90% of Web presences, and Archived Show Information, found on 85% of Web presences.

The potentially engaging tools identified within the Web presences of American not-for-profit theatre companies work together to provide the possibility of engagement

in all its forms—educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, and creative expression. The educational and privileged information provided by the Extended Show/Production Information, Theatre Company Information, News, and Archived Show Information categories clearly has the potential to heighten engagement through educated interpretation and social connection, and it may also give audience members the tools and vocabulary needed to participate in creative expression and conversation and critique. Also, by providing information about, as well as online applications for, activities that connect audience members to theatre companies, elements in the Donate, Subscription, and Share Function categories provide the opportunity for engagement through both social connection and educated interpretation. Additionally, by linking audience members to a theatre organization's social community, these elements may foster opportunities for engagement through conversation and critique. Similarly, by supplying a forum for individuals to express themselves publicly or privately as well as way to link themselves to a theatre company's community, elements in the Contact/Feedback and Social Media categories provide a space for potential engagement through social connection, conversation and critique, and possibly even creative expression. However, participation in conversation and critique may also increase an individual's knowledge base and lead to engagement through educated interpretation. Finally, by allowing audience members the opportunity to participate in and learn about the creative process in a hands-on way, elements in the Creative Submissions category have the potential not only to increase engagement through creative expression but also through educated interpretation.

The information and activities provided by elements on the sampled American not-for-profit theatre Web presences do not replace the experience of performance but may augment it by increasing audience engagement—active participation through educated interpretation, conversation and critique, social connection, or creative expression. Many of these potential tools for engagement may also be accessed live or through other media. For example, theatre-related books and magazines may foster educated interpretation; opening night parties may create a feeling of social connection; post-show audience talk-backs may allow for conversation and critique; and acting classes may encourage creative expression. However, by supplying opportunities for these kinds of participation online, the sampled American not-for-profit theater Web presences provide their audiences with the potential for convenient engagement that does not necessarily require a large commitment of time and energy and is available to them at any location and at any time of their choosing, provided that a connection to the Internet is available. As Li Lan Yong suggests, data posted on theatre Web sites can give a production "a longer life and wider circulation . . . ." Moreover, "The electronic medium of the Internet incorporates, magnifies and changes the significance of all these duplicatory media by providing an immediate, continuous accessibility and a breadth of public dissemination that can map over the performance as a simultaneous event with a virtual audience" (48). Therefore, the potentially engaging tools found within American not-for-profit theatre Web presences have the possibility of engaging a wider audience than tools which must be accessed through live participation or other forms of media do.

Previous literature established the importance of audience engagement in the theatrical experience (Bennett; Conner; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks; Tepper; McCarthy and Jinnett; Zakaras and Lowell) and revealed that the Internet may function both as a competitor to live theatrical participation and as a tool to build live theatrical participation by deepening audience engagement (Ivey; James Irvine Foundation; Funk; Jensen; Yong; Carson; Jenkins and Bertozzi; Tepper). This study, which proves that American not-for-profit theatre Web presences provide tools that have the potential to deepen an audience member's engagement in the theatrical experience through educated interpretation, social connection, conversation and critique, or creative expression, builds on previous research in a number of ways. First, it presents a thorough and specific definition of engagement based on a synthesis of several scholarly sources; second, it makes a clear case that online tools have the potential to increase audience engagement; and, third, by randomly sampling a large group of American not-for-profit theatre companies, it provides an unbiased account of the broad trends of the possibilities of theatre Web presences for deepening audience engagement.

Thus, this thesis may serve as a platform for further study of audience engagement via the Internet. Future research might investigate whether the potentially engaging online tools discussed here actually do increase engagement as well as how effectively they do so. Such research could include empirical surveys to measure audience members' perception of the effect of various Web elements on their eventual engagement in viewing a live theatrical production. Future studies might also examine why theatre companies do or do not include potentially engaging elements on their Web

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sites and how factors such as budget, size, location, community diversity, and type of work produced affect the quantity and quality of available Web content. Additionally, the basic definition of engagement and the methodologies employed by this thesis could easily be applied to studies of potentially engaging online tools in other types of theatre organizations, such as Broadway or community-based theatres, or even in other arts organizations, such as dance, musical, and visual arts companies. Finally, the examination of broad trends in this thesis may inform narrower studies of specific engaging elements, such as social media or study guides, or types of engagement, such as creative expression or conversation and critique.

McCarthy Ondaatje, Zakaras, and Brooks of the RAND corporation suggest that "[t]hose individuals who are most engaged by their arts experience are the ones who are the most attuned to the intrinsic benefits, and those benefits create not only positive attitudes toward the arts, but also the motivation to return," and, therefore arts organizations must do more to increase engagement. Additionally, Amy Petersen Jensen asserts that "[t]echnological tools are the language of the day," and ". . . those who wish to connect with spectators (for an artistic purpose, a commercial purpose, or any other purpose) must use the language or semantics of contemporary spectatorship (62, 134). By addressing the significance of both engagement and Internet technologies to audience participation in the theatrical experience, future studies of the possibilities of theatre Web sites in increasing audience engagement are relevant not only to theatre and arts participation scholars but also to theatre companies and other arts organizations.

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APPENDIX – ENGAGING ELEMENTS CHART

Category		Element	Recurrence on Theatre Web sites
News			90%
	1	E-Newsletter	90%
	2	General News/Announcements	65%
	3	Links to Outside Articles	50%
	4	Online Newsletter	35%
	5	Online Magazine	5%
Extended Show/Production Information			100%
	1	Play Synopsis	100%
	2	Poster Images	95%
	3	Photos	95%
	4	Full Reviews - Linked to or Posted	75%
	5	Video Clips	70%
	6	Cast Lists	70%
	7	Artist Biographies	60%
	8	Artist Headshots	45%
	9	Quotes from Reviews	35%
	10	Study Guides	35%
	11	Director's Notes/Recommendations	30%
	12	Artist Interviews	30%
	13	Educator Resources	25%
	14	Related Historical/Contextual/Cultural Info - Linked or Posted	20%
	15	Sound Clips	15%
	16	PDF Programs	10%
	17	Alumni News	10%
	18	Podcast	5%
	19	Special Applications and Animation	5%
Theatre Company Information			100%
	1	Mission/Vision Statement	100%
	2	History	100%
	3	General Description	90%
	4	Staff/Board/Founder Information	90%
	5	Sponsors/Memberships/Affiliations	85%
	6	Building Information	65%
	7	Program Information	60%
	8	Awards	50%
	9	Gift Shop Information	25%
	10	Frequently Asked Questions	20%

Category		Element	Recurrence on Theatre Web sites
Archived Show Information			85%
	1	Collection of Production Information	65%
	2	Production History List	50%
	3	Audience Submitted Memories	5%
Donate			95%
	1	Donation Information	90%
	2	Online Donation Application	85%
	3	Donor Benefits	65%
	4	Links to Retailers Who Donate Proceeds	20%
	5	Online Donation - Printable Form Only	5%
	6	Online Auction	5%
Subscribe			65%
	1	Subscription Information	65%
	2	Online Subscription Application	45%
	3	Downloadable PDF Subscription Only	15%
Merchandise Purchase/Download			20%
	1	Online Store	15%
	2	Downloads	5%
Share Functions			30%
	1	Social Media Share Button	20%
	2	E-mail Link	15%
	3	E-card	10%
Contact/Feedback			100%
	1	E-mail Contact	100%
	2	Encouragement to Provide Feedback	20%
	3	Public Audience Commentary	10%
	4	Videotaped Audience Feedback	10%
Social Media			100%
	1	Facebook	100%
	2	Twitter	60%
	3	Blog	35%
	4	My Space	5%
	5	Friend Feed	5%
	6	Yelp	5%
	7	Foursquare.com	5%
	8	LinkedIn	5%

Category		Element	Recurrence on Theatre Web sites
Social Media (continued)			
	9	Delicious	5%
Creative Submissions			20%
	1	Idea/Inspiration Submissions	20%
	2	Artistic Contest	10%