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Essay 2

Comp 211

Dr. Blouin

### The Business of Show Business

American regional theatre explores social and ethical issues. “When the American regional theatre movement took off in earnest in the early 1960s, it was traveling alongside some heady companion movements: Civil Rights, feminism, environmentalism, sexual liberation” (O’Quinn, 1). Today, theatres nationally deal with heavy social topics. Shows dealing with gender identity, sex, political topics etc. have gone on to be great commercial successes. Shows like, “Fun Home”, “Hamilton”, and the revival of Spring Awakening are considered to be controversial shows but have had great financial success. It is clear that theater is continuing to do what it was designed to do: explore humanity and spark discussion. But for communities in East TN and Southwest VA this type of exploration is proving difficult, if not impossible. With less education and fewer people being exposed to cultural and religious diversity, and the ever increasing generation gap, theatres struggle to draw an audience for shows which in more urban areas would be financially successful. Theaters in the south also struggle to please their biggest demographic the Baby Boomer generation. With the Baby Boomer generation getting older and generation Y rising to college age the social and economic demands on theatres are constantly changing. These changes leave theatres in a dangerous position financially, if they do not meet the artistic demands of their audience they will be met with financial ruin. How can regional theatres in East TN and Southwest VA keep up with the ever changing artistic demands? How

can they remain inclusive of all demographics? One way theatres can accomplish their goals is by a combination of exclusivity in marketing and inclusivity in production choice.

### *Southwest V VA*

Before one can develop a plan of action, artistic directors and marketers alike must know their audience. There are many things that can affect how a marketer approaches their audience, things like, education, religious belief, and overall financial status all affect whether a certain demographic will see a certain show. There are three factors that, while they effect all areas, are specifically prevalent in southwest VA. These factors make marketing and show choice in that region a unique challenge.

Education in Southwest VA is a major factor that keeps individuals from attending theatre. In southwest VA there are many people who are highly educated individuals, but there are a surprising number of people in southwest VA that have not had education passed high school or even the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The national average of people 18 years or older who have not had education passed the 8<sup>th</sup> grade is 5%; the average for people in southwest VA (LWIA 1), which includes Lee, Russel and Wise county, is 12% (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 38). This means that 12% of the region have never been exposed to authors and playwrights or have been forced to think critically about them. In fact, in 2003 a survey came out that said, that in both Russel county and Lee county 15% of the population is lacking in a basic prose literacy level (National Center for Education Statistics, 1). For theatres these statistics mean that 15% of the people that a theatre in south west VA services will not have read even the basic plays and will have little to no interest in theatre as a whole at all. Their lack of interest not only stems from lack of knowledge of how important theatre is but it also comes from a place of self-deprecation. Many people in southwest VA self-depreciate because of their lack of

education, they feel like they are not smart enough to appreciate or understand theatre and so, out of fear of feeling foolish, do not attend at all. While these people may not read great works of literature, most of them can read enough to have an idea about what the Bible says. If they cannot read, they learn either through a preacher, through memorization, or through hymns. This means that even if they do have some interest in theatre, this interest will most likely be tainted through a traditional conservative Christian distrust of theatre.

Conservative Christians have a long standing distrust of theatre. In the 17th and 18<sup>th</sup> century actors were excommunicated by the Catholic Church. In an article on the Catholic Church and theatre Sandra Gulland wrote, “Actors, by their very employment, were excommunicated” (Gulland, 1). Even today some Christians, particularly conservative Christians, do not trust theatres nor would they attend unless it is a well-known and trusted musical or classical play. Some still believe that theatre is evil and that the attendance of theatre is a sin,

That we ought not to countenance any class of wicked people in their sinful course, or, by any means, to encourage them to continue in it, will be acknowledged by all who believe that there is a difference between right and wrong—that there is any such thing as sin. But what are the prevailing character and lives of actors? Can anyone who values truth, say that they are commonly, or, indeed, are ever, excepting in very rare cases, people of decent, sober character? He certainly cannot. (American Tract Society)

Now certainly not all conservative Christians believe that all theatre is from the devil. But there are still many today who, if they do not boycott it entirely are extremely cautious in what they see. This is because conservative Christians do not trust theatres to teach things that line up with their world view. Their lack of trust is well founded, since theater is not designed to serve only one worldview. Theatre has also been known to mock Christianity,

Major protests erupted around the first major work by British dramatist Dennis Potter, *Son of Man*, a revisionist version of the final days of Christ, in 1969. Much more

recently, The Manhattan Theatre Club in New York at first refused in 1998 to present Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* because of threats of violence, even bombing of the theatre by protesters who objected to the play's depiction of Christ as a homosexual. (Carolson, 6)

Shows such as *Corpus Christi* give already distrustful conservative Christians even more reason to doubt that they will not be mocked for their world view while at the theatre. There is a lack of being open minded when approaching theatre that is characteristic of conservative Christian this is something that marketers have to overcome. The history between the church and the theatre has been rocky, but for theatres, specifically those located in the heart of the southern Bible belt, this history is something they will have to overcome.

Financial state of southwest VA is a factor that can also effect attendance of theatre. To attend a regional theatre's production it can cost between 25\$-45\$ per ticket this is another barrier nationally, but specifically in southwest VA. Overall, southwest VA has a lower income than the rest of Virginia, and that is lower than the rest of the country. "National per capita income stood at \$46,129" (Virginia.Gov). The average in southwest VA is significantly less, "The Southside and Southwest regions had the lowest per capita personal income at \$31,899 and \$32,289, respectively" (Virginia.gov). With personal income being marginally less than in other places, family have less excess money to spend on expensive events such as theatre. Theatre is traditionally sustained by the middle class, but with the average income of middle class in southwest being low, theatres are struggling to get audience members into seats.

These three factors play a major part in how people in southwest VA react to theatre. It is through this lens the people of southwest VA view their own culture and their ability to enjoy theatre. So how must an artistic director approach the first step in having a successful season, choosing show titles?

## *Choosing Show Titles*

Directors have a difficult task when it comes to choosing show titles. There are hundreds of thousands of show titles from which regional theatres can choose. When narrowing it down to 10 or 12 per season, there are many things an artistic must decide. First, the director must know what genres of shows they wish do to. There are many different genera in theatre, musical, straight play, avant-garde, experimental, etc. And in these categories there are subcategories, comedy, drama, contemporary, historical, political, religious, mystery, horror, romance, etc. This list goes on and there are plays with every combination or genera imaginable. With all of the options available, the most successful theatres have found that variety is the key to a successful season.

To have a successful season an artistic director needs to pick a variety so that the season on whole is inclusive. If the artistic directors tries to serve any one demographic more than the others, they will create an imbalance leading either to seasons with no substance, or seasons that are too exclusive. Balance is key to the success of any season at any regional theatre.

An example of balance in show choice for a season is found at the Barter Theatre. The Barter theatre is the biggest and most successful theatre in southwest VA. The Barter is a repertory theatre that performs between 20 and 30 productions per year (Rose). With doing that many productions the Barter has been able to do a wide variety of show that appeal to all demographics and generations. In the coming year. 2016, they have straight plays such as *Peter and the Start Catchers*, a family friendly comedy just off of Broadway, *Lying in State*, a Political comedy, *Something Wicked this Way Comes*, a thriller, and *George Orwell's 1984* a dystopian story, as well as many more straight plays (Barter). These straight plays alone showcase a wide

variety of ethical principles, religious ideals, literary merit, which gives people from all walks of life a chance to see a show that appeals to them.

The idea of picking a wide variety of shows has been used for many years. In the 1974-1975 season at The New Birmingham Repertory Theatre, in Birmingham England, artistic director Michael Simpson, deviated from the path of his predecessors and chose a season with variety (Brigg, 99). There were two world premier straight plays, a documentary, a musical adaptation, and an exotic production. (Brigg, 99). Not only did this season draw a crowd because of the variety of shows that appealed different demographics, but also they used the curiosity factor of exclusivity. Curiosity can be used to draw a crowd especially at an exclusive event like a world premier which only happens once with a limited run and is new and unknown. Audiences will be drawn to the known and will pay to see what is going on. The exclusivity of world premieres and exotic plays are helpful from a marketing standpoint because they draw a curious crowd. They have a layer of exclusivity but at the same time their titles are accessible as in anyone could see the world premier or the exotic play and gain something from there. There are accessible to all people and the season on a whole is inclusive of all artistic desires an audience can have. While the choice of shows in season needs to be inclusive, not every show will be morally inclusive of all people. Different people have different standards which are effected by religion, education, social class and generation.

Not all shows are inclusive, but all are accessible, in that all people are capable of gaining something from all shows. While they may not gain a lot nor will they all ways gain something helpful or profitable, they will all gain something and leave the theatre changed. Theatre deals in human emotions, those are the tools of the trade. At its core, theatre is the exploration of human

emotions. The emotions can come as a reaction to extreme situations, such as war, postmodern society, and sociological trauma. Or they can come from simple and relatable challenges that we as humans face every day. All of these emotions on a base level are relatable to every human being. Everyone at some point in their life, whether long or short, has felt one or more of these emotions, fear, love, jealousy, passion etc. on some level. Which means that, on some level, all theatre is accessible to all people. The best example of this is the 2006 Broadway show, *Spring Awakening* this avant-guard, rock musical, was a surprise hit (Hoskins, 395). In the article “Marketing musicals: Commercializing the avant-garde in *Spring Awakening*,” Vicki L. Hoskins of the University of Pittsburgh, had this to say about the surprise success of an avant-garde piece:

When *Spring Awakening* opened on Broadway in 2006, it rattled the musical theatre world, leaving traditional musical lovers to declaim the ‘death’ of the genre, while young people everywhere began patronizing an art form they had previously considered old fashioned. The musical was raw, raunchy, discussed sexuality openly, and had a rock and roll score. The show set Broadway afire, grossing over \$57 million dollars during its initial run and earning eight Tony Awards. (Hoskins, 395-396)

This show was unlike anything that had ever been done. It pushed the envelope for mainstream musical theatre. People did not think that this kind of variation from the norm could be a commercial success. It deviated from the traditional musical styles of shows like *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Sound of music*, *West Side Story*, and *Cinderella*. But it served an artistic need that many people had. It dealt openly with the struggles that young people have face. Topics such as sex, suicide, abortion, depression, and rape were not a part of the musical theatre scene before *Spring Awakening* and they certainly were not part of commercial successes. These new elements are part of what is considered avant-guard

The ‘avant-garde’ encompasses a wide range of disparate voices, styles and movements. In his treatise into the avant-garde, Bert Cardullo states that the category ‘repudiates traditional values and assumptions, then, in addition to dismissing the rhetoric by which

they were once communicated; and in the process it elevates the individual over the group, human beings' interior life over their communal existence. (Hoskins, 360)

There were many conservative producers who believe that this kind of deviation cannot lead to a commercially successful show. And while it is more difficult to make shows such as *Spring Awakening* a success, it is certainly not impossible. Shows like these deal with themes like lost love, discovering of sexual desire, and lost hope are relatable to many people, regardless of the musical genera in which it is packaged. *Spring Awakening* is an accessible show to all people, even though it is avant-guard. This show proved that regardless of genre or artistic style any show can a commercial success due to the universal accessibility of theatre.

This show may be accessible, but it is not inclusive. There are large demographics of people who would not see *Spring Awakening* because of the themes it deals with, regardless of how much one may relate to a theme many do not want to see that acted out before them. The sex/rape scene at the end of act one, or the song about male masturbation are instances where theatres loose the family demographic, the conservative Christian demographic, and some of the old generations, such as the baby boomer generation, who were raised to believe that topics like that are inappropriate to talk about in public or mixed company. These scenes are vital to the story, but regardless of how necessary they are to the show, there are demographics who will not see the show because of the broad topics. This makes the show exclusive in that it is aiming at a certain demographic while knowingly losing others. Theatres in the southwest VA region such as the Barter Theatre would not be able to do this show with any financial success, because their main demographics are the very demographics who would be offended by this show. This demographic is the conservative family demographic. *Spring Awakening* is still accessible to anyone on an emotional level, but it is not inclusive of all demographics.



While the loss of the conservative family demographic is not enough to hurt the financial success of the show in places like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, in a small area like southwest VA, losing that demographic would be detrimental. If a theatre like the Barter chose to do *Spring Awakening*, they would also need to have a very family friendly, morally inclusive show running opposite. That way the alienated demographic is still spending money at the theatre, even if they chose not to see a show like *Spring Awakening*.

While the principle of variety of show choice holds true in southwest VA, but there are some slight modifications that must be made based on the area. One still must pick a variety of shows but it cannot be perfectly balanced to serve a variety of demographics because there are some very predominate demographics that in order to remain financially stable to which one must cater. One of those demographics is the conservative Christian community. While there are many different standards among the umbrella of Christianity, there are some things that almost all agree on. Not blaspheming God is a major point. That is why shows like *The Book of Mormon* would not be a financial success. With their song “*Hasa Diga Eebowai*” which translated mean “F\*\*k you God,” this show would not be well received on the whole in the region known as the Bible belt. This is information that is well known to the producers of *The Book of Mormon*, which is why during their national tour they did not travel to the south. The farthest south they went was Atlanta (Rose). While Atlanta is part of the south, it is an urban area where there is more diversity in moral and religious beliefs. There are guiding demographics in the south and especially in southwest VA and they should be catered to, while still including the other demographics. That is how the principle of inclusivity in show choice should be played out in a practical sense in southwest VA.

## *Marketing*

There is another component to meeting the artistic needs of a community while still have financial success: marketing. Marketing is crucial to the success of a show in the long term (Mabbitt). Before one can market individual shows to exclusive groups of people one must first market the theatre itself. While audience members are coming for the show, if they feel a sense of loyalty to the theatre itself, they will be more likely to return. The Barter Theatre does this in a few ways. They are the greenroom society, an exclusive group of donors that receive special privileges like attending opening galas, special preview showing etc. This gives them a sense of belonging to the theatre. They feel like they are one of the company members. They have a hand in keeping the Barter open. Barter also list anyone who donates to the theatre over a certain amount in a list in the program for everyone to see. These list again make people take possession of the Barter and will come see more shows to see how their money is put to use. These people are also more likely to recommend the theatre to their friends because they feel a part of the theatre. Pushing the theatre as a whole helps to build a steady base audience which can help compensate for show choice.

After a season has been carefully chosen, the marketers must help decide how to best showcase the season. At the end of the day the artistic director is responsible for the success of a seasons based on their show choice. Like in any company, there is only so much the marketer can do. In the book *The Definitive Guide to Entrainment Marketing* by Al Lieberman and Patricia Esgate, the authors discuss the role of the marketer in relation to the artistic director:

While teams of experts assist with the various steps involved in the marketing timeline, including awards presentations, deal negotiations and contract completions, they can only help the boss navigate the precarious grounds and attempt to avoid disaster. (Lieberman and Esgate, 35)

Note words such as “help” or “assist;” the final result is not up to the marketer, regardless of how much they succeed or fail. They are there to help the process, not to work magic. Even if they are the best marketers in the world, they cannot convince people to go against their beliefs or convictions. A marketer’s job is to display the product in an appealing way to the consumer. If the marketer begins to challenge the consumer’s personal beliefs they are less likely to buy the product or ever buy that product. Trying to convince someone to go against their personal belief is not only unlikely to work but is a waste of time a resources that could be spent elsewhere. In the example of *The Book of Mormon*, no matter how successful the marketer is, they will never be able to convince conservative Christians to see a show that says “F\*\*k you God.” Marketers are not there to convince, but to display the product in a way that intrigues the most people within the targeted demographic.

In all forms of marketing, it is crucial to reach the intended demographic. It is the marketer’s job to understand this and reach out to the demographic which is included in that particular show. This is an exclusive approach to marketing. This does not usurp general marketing, but it is a layer that needs to be added. This is a principle in all entertainment marketing because entertainment is so specialized. *The Definitive Guide to Entertainment Marketing* had this to say about finding your key demographic, or the demographic that is your target when advertising:

When considering where to place their advertising- and therefore their dollar- decision makers focus on what programs/timeslots are most frequented by the particular demographic group to which they wish to sell. For example, placing an ad for a product mostly used by 18- to 24-year-old females in the middle of Monday Night Football

probably isn't going to give an advertiser the best bang for its buck. Demographics are the key to matching the right wallet with the right product. (Lieberman and Esgate, 85)

It is the marketer's job to make the connection between the person and the product. This can only be done if there is a target demographic in mind when starting out on the venture. Also, knowing the different demographics in the area is important. What effectively reaches 20-year-old college students at New York University might not be as effective in reaching the 20-year-old college students at Milligan College. While there is some overlap, to optimize on the marketing opportunity, one must tailor their technique exclusively to each demographic. There are many tools one can target an exclusive demographic and successfully market to them, and if they are utilized properly in theatre ticket sales can increase.

Exclusivity can be used to help increase ticket sales, because it helps connect the proper demographic with the proper title. Many different people will enjoy any given title, part of exclusivity in marketing is know the individual demographic that would be the most likely to enjoy the show but the least likely to come of their own accord. One way to do this is through television advertisements. This only appeals to a certain demographic. Students and young adults do not spend much time watching the local news, or local daytime talk shows (Lieberman and Esgate, 81). This appeals more to the home makers who are near a television during the day, the retired to have time to watch television at leisure, or those who watch the evening news. On the whole, this is an older demographic. With that in mind, one should be prudent which shows one advertised for on local stations. If the theatre was producing both *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *9 to 5*, an advertisement for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* on the noon talk show might generate some buzz, but not as much as *9 to 5* would. *9 to 5* is about working women rising up against their chauvinist boss, and proving that they have the power to do anything they

want. This targets working women, feminists, and women in general. This also appeals to an older demographic since it was a movie in the 80s, and since the songs were written by Dolly Parton people who love Dolly Parton music would be another target audience. This is a smart way to reach a target demographic without spending or wasting thousands of dollars.

One way to save money in marketing is to use what is already there, for theatre it is the “special” quality. When advertising any show exclusively, it is key to remember that each show needs to be “special.” There must be something that makes each specific show unique. What makes a show special? Al Lieberman and Patricia Esgate put the idea of “Special” into a formula, “Key components of ‘special’ are limitation and exclusivity (Lieberman and Esgate, 254). Theatre captures limitation because there are only a certain number of performances for each show. This is something that a marketer can promote using emails and social media. There will only be X amount of shows produced with that specific cast so one should buy a ticket and be part of the exclusive club of individuals who were able to experience the show. These limitations make the show special and the people who see it special. Each production is unique and each individual is unique. That is the beauty of theatre. “The beauty of live theatre is the fact that every single performance is different from the last- perhaps not noticeably, but it is, after all, live” (Lieberman and Esgate, 205). This is something exclusive to theatre that marketers can capture and, with the use of mediums like television, newspaper and most of all the combination of social media and work of mouth, marketers can help make a show financially successful.

In southwest VA, the biggest source of marketing is word of mouth (Rose). When people talk or post about shows that sparks a curiosity and hopefully some interest. Word of mouth could also have the opposite effect of the success of the show. If the wrong demographic comes to see a show they could leave with negative feelings which could lead to bad word of mouth. A

few negative tweets or negative gossip around the town, in the long turn could lead to bad ticket sales. While it is nice to have any people in the seats, the repercussions could be harmful or helpful depending on the demographic that the show is aimed toward. This is why exclusivity in marketing is key. If the wrong demographic is pushed toward a show, the show financially could be disasters regardless of its merits. In southwest VA, exclusivity in marketing is extremely important. It keeps the right demographic coming and the wrong ones, on a whole, from having a bad experience. Rick Rose uses this phrase, coined by Robert Porterfield the found the Barter Theatre, to promote this idea of the power of word of mouth/ social media, “If you like us talk about us, and if you don’t then just keep your mouth shut” (Porterfield). While this line is normally taken as a joke, it also emphasizes the importance of word of mouth.

How can theatres in southwest VA keep up with ever changing artistic demands? How can they remain inclusive of all demographics? While there are many way theatres can approach these issues, inclusivity in show choice and exclusivity in marketing allow for the most flexibility. They allow for theatres to change with the ever shifting artistic demands for the different generations, and it allows them freedom to explore artistically without great risk. With those advantages it is clear to see that inclusivity in show choice and exclusivity in marketing are a dynamic pair that can save a regional theatre from financial disaster.

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