

Advocating Arts to the Public: Outreach and Education in Performing Arts

Fanny M. Y. CHUNG

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Abstract

Nine major performing arts organizations (otherwise known as “Big Nine” or MPAOs) are directly funded by the Hong Kong SAR Government (HKSAR) in Hong Kong. In view of the relatively low attendance rate in performing arts in Hong Kong (Home Affairs Bureau, 2012), there is a pressing need for the performing arts sector to advocate arts to the public and develop audience. Taking a qualitative research approach, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with five cultural leaders in Hong Kong. This study aims to examine the impacts of outreach and education programmes in the MPAOs in Hong Kong. The findings suggest that the outreach programmes can achieve educational goals in various perspectives, such as aesthetics, whole-person development and cultural citizenship. Nevertheless, the immediate impact on audience attendance is questionable and the interviewees of this study suggested that the nurturing of interests should be prioritized. The findings of this study may help the performing arts organizations identify and formulate the outreach and education strategies that best benefit the public and suit the audience development needs.

Introduction

According to the current funding mechanism of Hong Kong, nine major performing arts organizations¹ (otherwise known as “Big Nine” or MPAOs) are directly funded by the Hong Kong SAR Government (HKSAR). In addition to putting up superb performing arts programmes for inspiring and elating audiences in Hong Kong and around the world, the component of outreach and education also play a significant role in all the major nine major performing arts organizations. In view of the relatively low attendance rate in performing arts in Hong Kong (Home Affairs Bureau, 2012), there is a pressing need for the performing arts sector to develop high quality outreach programmes to tailor for the purposes of advocating arts to the public and audience development. Taking a qualitative research approach, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with five senior arts administrators who are considered as cultural leaders in Hong Kong and are currently at the Director, Head and Manager Rank of the MPAOs. This study aims to examine the impacts of outreach and education programmes in MPAOs in Hong Kong, with particular focus on the aspects of education and audience development.

Outreach and Audience Development in Performing Arts Organizations

¹ These are Hong Kong Philharmonic Society Limited, Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra Limited, Hong Kong Sinfonietta Limited, Hong Kong Repertory Theatre Limited, Chung Ying Theatre Company (HK) Limited, Zuni Icosahedron, Hong Kong Dance Company Limited, The Hong Kong Ballet Limited and City Contemporary Dance Company Limited.

The term “Outreach” refers to any efforts that seeks to ensure the greatest possible impact of arts productions on artists and audiences, as well as the efforts to reach new audiences and to educate the community about the beauty and value of arts (Bradaric, 2007). Scholars have made attempts to define the underlying meaning of audience development. Maitland (2000) defined audience development as a planned process which involved building a relationship between an individual and the arts; Single (1991) defined audience development as building larger audiences through a combination of promotion, publicity, marketing, communications, education and outreach; and Australian Council (2015) defined it as a strategic, dynamic and interactive process of making the arts accessible. Single (1991) further suggested that the focus of audience development should not be only on the quantity, but also the quality which is indeed of utmost importance. According to Kawashima’s (2000) conceptual framework, there are four types of audience development, namely (i) Cultural Inclusion; (ii) Extended marketing; (iii) Taste Cultivation; and (iv) Audience Education.

In view of the decreasing number of audience and the increasing competition among leisure activities, arts establishments in the globe have focused increasingly on audience development (Scollen, 2009). “Test Drive the Arts” was a one-year audience development programs in Australia, that provided participants with two complimentary tickets to attend one live performance. Participants were invited to attend the second performance with discounted rate and the third performance with other incentives such as a complimentary drink. Another audience development programme was named “Talking Theatre”, providing participants with three complimentary tickets to attend three live performances which vary in style and content. Participants were then invited to attend future performances with occasional incentives. Both audience development programmes receive positive results, with an average of 30% of the participants purchased tickets after the programs.

Method

Taking a qualitative approach, the data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with the cultural leaders in Hong Kong. Convenience sampling was adopted in this study in which five senior arts administrators of the nine MPAOs in Hong Kong at the rank of Director, Head and Manager were invited for the interviews. The qualitative data collected was analysed based on Hachiya’s (2001) conceptual framework of Arts Education.

Results

To what extent do the outreach and education in the performing arts institutions make impacts on the participants (if any), in terms of education?

The qualitative data collected was analysed based on Hachiya’s (2001) conceptual framework of Arts Education. It was identified from the findings that there exists three layers of significance of arts education in the Outreach and Education of the performing arts organization:

- *Layer 1: “cultivate aesthetic appreciation as well as increasing their perception of the arts” – feeling of enjoyment; increased interest; development of knowledge; and enhanced understanding in the arts.*

- *Layer 2: “contribute to students’ total development” - being a better man; improved ethic quality; enhanced mental health and physical condition; and acquired knowledge and generic skills through the learning of arts (e.g. language, social and communication, cognitive and physical development.*
- *Layer 3: “develop cultural citizenship, and preparing people to be competent and responsible members of their cultural communities” – development of sense of responsibilities in the community, greater understanding of self and society; improved human quality; enhanced cultural and national identity; and enhanced ethics and moral values.*

To what extent do the efforts of outreach and education make authentic impacts on the audience development (i.e. the number of audience) of the performing arts organizations (if any)?

All the interviewees in this study suggested that it is hard to quantify and measure the effectiveness of outreach and education programmes in terms of audience building, though they all recognize the value of outreach and education programmes in promoting the arts and their organizations. Interviewee 1 said, “It is difficult to measure the results of audience building. It might require a longer time to see the result”. Interviewee 2 said,

It is hard to quantify [the impacts on box office]. We can keep track of the number of tickets purchased by our members, but it’s hard to measure how many tickets each of our members has purchased after they joined as a member, especially the URBRIX system cannot provide these statistical data for us.

On the other hand, however, all the interviewees in this study have noted the increased interests among the participants through outreach programmes. Such increased interests may have positive impacts on audience building in the medium and long term. Other benefits brought by outreach programmes as revealed in this study include increased opportunities for the sponsorship and donation for the organizations due the nature of education.

Discussion

Impacts of Outreach in Performing Arts Organizations

The results of this study clearly indicated the significance of outreach programmes in the performing arts organizations, particularly in terms of educational value. Importantly, the results also indicate the provision of educational programmes in the arts in these informal settings can fill the gap of the formal education system, from the perspectives such as resources, variety, and artistry. All the arts administrators in this study suggested that there is no evidence on whether or to what extent their outreach and education programmes have made impacts on audience building, despite they all acknowledge the meaning and value of outreach programmes in the performing arts organizations. It is hard to quantify and map how the resources allocated to outreach programmes have contributed to audience building. As noted by one of the interviewees of this study, “We can check how many tickets have been sold to our members, but we can’t measure how many tickets were sold after they become our members, especially

URBRIX can't provide such figures for us to study and keep track of". In fact, the cultivation of interests in the arts should be a long-term process. It is hard to measure without tracking records of students' life in longitudinal studies. With the awareness of such uniqueness of the arts, this implies that the performing arts organizations should continue to dedicate their efforts and resources with a long-term vision to develop not only audience for their group, but also audience for the arts industry as a whole. For the medium term, the performing arts organizations can continue to further broaden their membership mechanism for promoting loyalty and participation in the arts. Such purchasing and audience behaviours within the membership mechanism may provide the arts organizations with relatively traceable and quantifiable ground for future developing.

Collaboration among Performing Arts Organizations

This study has revealed the powerful impacts of creativity- and play-based outreach programmes. For example, the participants of SMILE and MUSE UP organized by the Chung Ying Theatre Company enhanced participants' development in their critical reasoning capabilities and sensitivity towards the society respectively. These could be evidenced by the performances and community services demonstrated by the participants. The findings speak for collaboration among the performing arts organizations for creating interdisciplinary arts engagement opportunities. Fisher and Preece's (2002) study noted that performing arts events are complements rather than substitutes and even the more audience attend a specific art form, the more likely the audience will become committed to the other. This helps dispel the notion of competitions among performing arts organizations and therefore encourage the performing arts organizations to collaborate more closely together to optimize the building of audience and address the diverse needs and interests of the audience or potential audience.

Conclusion

The findings of this study imply that the delivery of outreach programmes by performing arts organizations can achieve various perspectives of educational goals, which can fill the gaps of arts education in formal education of Hong Kong. Other benefits brought by outreach programmes include increased opportunities for the sponsorship and donation for the organizations due the appealing nature of education. Despite all the interviewees in this study suggested the great value of outreach and education programmes in the performing arts organizations, the authentic impact on box-office and audience building is still hard to measure and quantify. Nevertheless, nurturing interests in the arts and quality audience is a long-term process and, to this end, everyone has their own pace and path.

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