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Hard Evidence for the Value of the Arts

**Free Night of Theater Program Packs a Diverse Crowd
& Helps Nonprofit Theatres Develop New Patrons**

SAN FRANCISCO, June 1, 2009 – How do you measure the feeling of being spellbound by a live theatre performance and its contribution to the richness of one's life? For a long time arts organizations have struggled with the difficulty of quantifying the intangible value they provide to their audiences and to society. This week **Theatre Bay Area** releases results from a groundbreaking pilot study that measures and demonstrates the inherent value of the arts.

The study "Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of the Bay Area Free Night of Theater Program" aims to understand how audiences are transformed by live theater performances and provides an insight into how to develop new mechanisms to track audience impact in the future. In doing so, the study accomplishes what many believed impossible -- to statistically demonstrate the intrinsic value of the performing arts. The study surveyed Bay Area Free Night of Theater (FNOT) attendees on a variety of measurable criteria, including the audience's expectations for the performance, level of captivation and impacts experienced during the performance, and lingering impressions felt days later. The study considers the potential of six different kinds of impacts: emotional resonance, intellectual stimulation, spiritual value, aesthetic growth and social bonding. The study further explores how Free Nighters experiences differ from those of regular ticket-buying audience members. Some 80 theaters participated in the study, which was conducted during Theatre Bay Area's Free Night of Theater campaign in October 2008. Just over 1,400 FNOT patrons and another 675 regular (paying) audience members took the survey.

While FNOT and ticket-buying audiences look different in terms of demographics, familiarity with theater and comfort level going into the theater, the impact data shows that FNOT audiences largely experienced the same positive effects of a theater performance as regular paying audiences. Key findings include:

- FNOT audiences tend to be younger, more ethnically diverse, and equally well educated as ticket-buying patrons.
- Compared to regular audiences, FNOT audiences were initially less confident that they would enjoy the performance, yet **FNOT audiences were more likely to follow the work of that theatre company in the future**
- Significantly, while FNOT audiences attend theater less frequently than ticket-buying patrons and **have fewer friends who attend theatre regularly, FNOT reported significantly higher levels of intellectual stimulation, and were more likely to leave the performance with new insight on human relations.**
- FNOT audiences were also **twice as likely as regular audiences to say that they were exposed to a new style or type of theatre**, a key indicator of aesthetic growth.

“This pilot study reveals the enormous contribution that the Free Night of Theater program can play, both in diversifying the demographic of theatre audiences and in helping nonprofit theatres extend and develop their base of loyal patrons,” says TBA Executive Director, Brad Erickson.

In summary, the data seem to suggest that:

- **Regardless of ticket price, patrons who make it through the doors of the theatre and are captivated by the live performance do exhibit measurable signs of intrinsic impact from that art.** The most notable of these signs include increased intellectual and emotional engagement, social bonding and aesthetic growth.
- **The FNOT program serves to create social accessibility by providing an opportunity for theatergoers with unsupportive social networks to attend the theatre.** The data reveals that the lack of a social network can be a major barrier to theater attendance. However, by lowering the perceived cost (offering performances for free), theatre companies can generate large numbers of new patrons and foster new social networks – with a high number of patrons promising to return and pay due to the inherent and social impacts of the experience.

The study also notes several interesting differences that were observed among individual productions. For example:

- The highest incidence of aesthetic growth was observed among Free Nighters in Teatro Vision’s *House on Mango Street* audience.
- FNOT respondents who attended Berkeley Repertory Theatre’s production of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, an August Wilson play that follows freed African-American slaves in the North, were more likely to feel a sense of belonging or connectedness with the rest of the audience. This might be attributed in part to the higher level of ethnic diversity among this group of FNOT attendees.

A secondary outcome of the study was the development of new reporting tool – an ‘audience impact dashboard’ – that theatres might use to monitor the impact of their programs on a regular basis. This pilot study helps to refine research methods that will allow impact assessment to be ‘scaled up’ in the future. Results will be used by Theatre Bay Area and its members to stimulate new dialogue about impact and mission. Theatre Bay Area will facilitate conversations on how theaters might incorporate impact assessment into their organizational thinking on a systematic basis. As Alan Brown, principal at WolfBrown and nationally recognized arts researcher, said, “The value of this research lies not in the data, but in the quality of conversation that happens around the data.”

The study was made possible by a generous grant from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.

A copy of the “Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of the Bay Area Free Night of Theatre Program” report can be accessed online through the DataPoint section of Theatre Bay Area’s website, www.theatrebayarea.org/datapoint or at www.wolfbrown.com.

About Theatre Bay Area

Theatre Bay Areas’ mission is to unite, strengthen, sustain and promote the theatre community of the Bay Area, working from the conviction that the performing arts are an essential public good, critical to a truly prosperous and democratic society, and invaluable as a source of personal enrichment and growth. Theatre Bay Area’s membership is derived from 11 Bay Area counties and consists of more than 420 theatre and dance companies, some 3,000 individuals, and more than 100 organizational members. More information about TBA is available at www.theatrebayarea.org.

About WolfBrown

WolfBrown is a cross-disciplinary team of professional consultants with experience in fundraising, marketing, planning, research, evaluation, program design, arts education and other areas. WolfBrown's consultants have had distinguished careers as practitioners prior to becoming consultants. In those roles and later in their roles as advisors they have counseled hundreds of organizations – large and small – in almost every state and in numerous countries. Their research and publications have had impact on a number of fields, and they have developed new methodologies and bodies of work which benefit the arts industry as a whole.

Free Night of Theater is an audience development program administered nationally by Theatre Communications Group, and facilitated locally by Theatre Bay Area. Starting with just three pilot cities, including the Bay Area, in 2005, the campaign has grown to include more than 120 metropolitan regions across the country, including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The campaign runs each October. More information on this year's Free Night of Theater campaign will be available in September at www.tixbayarea.com.

For more information or to schedule an interview with Brad Erickson, the Executive Director of Theatre Bay Area, or Alan Brown, principal researcher on this report, please contact Barbara Wichmann at 415.351.2227 or submit your request to b.wichmann@artemia.com

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