

Legal Name

Illusion Theater and School Inc

Project Title

To host Kimberly Elise at Illusion Theater to imagine and explore new approaches to demand building for theater.

DDCF Grant Number

2013245

Project Progress and Successes

We held 10 focus groups and talked to 283 audience and potential audience members ages 17-30. The group sizes ranged from 5-60.

Resident Artist Kimberly Elise ran all the focus groups with either Illusion Producing Director Bonnie Morris, Executive Producing Director Michael Robins, or Education Director Karen Gundlach accompanying her. Participants came from:

- A filmmaking class at Metropolitan Community & Technical College (MCTC), an inner-city school serving a highly diverse population
- A Political/Current Events class at Metropolitan Community & Technical College (MCTC), an inner-city school serving a highly diverse population
- A Shakespeare class and a General Theater class at Patrick Henry High School, an inner-city public high school with a highly diverse population
- Members of Illusion's young artist's roundtable: The Lighthouse.
- A class from the University of Minnesota's African and African-American Studies Department
- A general meeting of young artists/audience members
- Two groups of diverse young women who are part of Illusion's Keepin' It Real program
- A Media Studies class at the Art Institute's International Minneapolis campus

Kimberly also attended three staff meetings, met with Illusion's board, and attended two receptions during her residency interacting with an additional 75 members of the community.

FROM A WRAP-UP BY ARTIST KIMBERLY ELISE:

We had the opportunity to meet with many young adults in our 18-25/30 target group while visiting both high schools and colleges in the Twin Cities Metro area. The groups were uniformly articulate, intelligent, opinionated and extremely forthcoming with their thoughts, feelings, opinions related to how to address and remedy the lack of young adults attending live theater. Additionally the groups were very racially diverse, economically diverse and a large part of them were not students of the arts and thus were able to serve as real life resources for us to inquire the best ways to attract people who don't normally have an artistic slant to attend live theater. Through these interviews we were able to garner various ideas on attraction and retention of theater-goers in this age demographic. As such, I would deem the focus groups highly successful.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

FROM KIMBERLY ELISE:

I thought we might meet with some resistance from the interviewees but it was quite the contrary, the students were very open and enthusiastic and really appreciative to have a group of adults genuinely asking their opinion about something!

FROM ILLUSION

In addition, Illusion staff felt there was a natural connection with our work and the participants' interests. We were just not on their "radar." An additional challenge was the fact that this cohort is very involved in figuring out their lives -- either finishing high school and preparing for the next phase of their lives or immersed in their post-high school life -- and although they were open to attending a new work at Illusion, leaving their campus or school environment was an obstacle.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

FROM KIMBERLY ELISE:

My future recommendations are largely based on the feedback and suggestions we received from the youth.

1. It would be more enticing to the demographic if they felt a sense of inclusion in the theater. In this day and age, young people are interested in having the opportunity to share their voice, unique identity and personality. The popularity of all the social media platforms are a great indication of this as these young adults are thriving in a world where they can have their own YouTube channel, Instagram page or website. They have the ability to easily write, star in, produce and broadcast to the entire world their thoughts, feelings, and artistic creations. The theater that is produced by professional companies would be well served by recognizing this new power that this generation has and include them as much as possible in the creative process and execution of staged productions. This type of co-producing would create a stronger sense of ownership and will encourage youth to come out and in addition if they are not a part of the production, they are more prone to attend a show they know that their peer is somehow involved in.

2. More new faces on stage. It's not to say eliminate the more familiar faces, but to go out into the schools and colleges and recruit actors and actresses would serve theater well. It would be wise to learn who is popular among the youth. There are DJs, comedians, poets, singers, musicians, dancers, rappers and underground artists that the demographic loves and will do anything to support. To learn who these people are and integrate them into the theater works would be very beneficial.

3. It is important to ensure that the topics or storylines that are being put on stage are of relevance and interest to the demographic. It is easy for us to think we know, but the best way to ensure this is to assess their topics of interest through focus groups such as these or maintain friendly relationships with youth who are out in the world "hearing the buzz," reporting this back to us and to integrate this information into scheduling when a theater company is first planning its production slate for the year.

4. On the topic of show subject matter, there was no really consistent genre that was preferred over the other. While one group loathed musicals, another group loved them. What did seem to be consistent however was that diversity is important to them. There is a lot of interest from them that the world of the stage (and all entertainment for that matter) be represented like the real world. And the ideal would not be a play about a particular race's experience, i.e., a play about the struggles and discrimination a black family goes through, though they said this is definitely interesting and important. Plays with multiethnic casts playing non-race related parts were more exciting to them. This age group is far less color conscious than previous generations and desires more plays that are just about the race that is shared by all -- the human race. And rather than reenacting the past, their minds are focused on, "how can we as humans move the world and planet forward?" Additionally, historical plays or plays written over 20 years ago would be more appealing to this demographic if they had a new twist put to them. As an example, they would be far more interested in going to see something called "12 Angry Transgender Women" than going to see "12 Angry Men." So, to take some material they are already familiar with or had to read in school and make it somehow fresh would be exciting to them. It seems that historical or classic plays are not of great interest. There is more interest in plays written or exploring the last 20 years, with a great interest in the social, political, and pop culture of the decade of the 1980s. So, a multicultural play that took place in 1985 would have a good chance at attracting this audience.

5. Money is a huge challenge for this age group. With so many of them working to pay for their education or just to live every day, and with the ability to stream entertainment at home for almost free or hang out at a bar with cheap beer, the idea of spending money on a play just isn't appealing. Any and all opportunities there are to make tickets affordable would encourage them to go. For many students, they said that money was the ONLY thing that was keeping them away. Illusion Theater is already doing a great job of offering different ways for people to see plays for free, i.e., ushering a show. And this is a positive. They said again and again, "If you offer us a cheap ticket and free food, we will come!"

6. Illusion Theater is actually doing many of the things that the demographic said would make them come to the theater. The problem then, it seems, is awareness. The majority of the students, unless they had a personal relationship with the theater, were completely unaware of Illusion Theater. The fact that the theater is in the heart of downtown and many of them have walked by it hundreds of times and didn't know it was there, was very surprising to me. This lack of awareness wasn't exclusive to Illusion, however. The only theaters and shows the demographic was familiar with were the very, very large theaters or the touring shows that come to town and advertise on television. The students were not familiar with the vast majority, if any, of the small to medium sized theaters. When asked, "how can we reach you?," the number one suggestion was social media. Primarily Facebook. Other suggestions were:

- Clever ads placed directly on campus/high school or other hang outs this age frequents
- Aligning with the student unions/high school teachers and counselors and forming student representatives who help spread the word on campus about upcoming shows and happenings at the theater
- Advertising on campus radio
- Producing short trailers of upcoming shows that show on Facebook
- Creating a personal presence with the students through the student unions, arts classes, and leaders on campus and then personally going to classes or functions and letting them know what is coming up at the theater.

Overall we were met with a lot of enthusiasm and positivity. There is a new audience

waiting to be welcomed to live theater. I think our going out and visiting these students and genuinely asking for their help in better understanding how to serve them opened their hearts to theater even more. Additionally, I think seeing us in person and watching us whole-heartedly listen to them really demystified the people behind theater. These young adults have the belief that theater is "foo-foo" and stuck up and that they would not be welcomed there without our fur coats and high heels. To learn that every theater has its own personality and we all can't be grouped into one persona was quite enlightening to them. Learning that at Illusion you can wear jeans or a ball gown made them smile.

I personally felt proud and excited about the youth we met. They are open hearted, desiring a better world and very wise in their direction of the future. They want to embrace theater and with a little encouragement, continued grass roots efforts and further invitation from us, I see a full house with the next generation of theatergoers.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

<https://www.facebook.com/IllusionTheater>

<https://twitter.com/illusiontheater>

<https://instagram.com/illusiontheater>

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Yes, Michael Robins

e-mail (mrobins@illusiontheater.org)