

The West End Theatre Audience

ANTHONY McCALL

Who would have thought that theatre, or to be more exact, live entertainment, rated twice as highly as cinema among Londoners? The news is encouraging for those in the industry who are only too keenly aware of the growing problems surrounding live entertainment. Yet, as with the serious professionals within the acting fraternity who time and again return to the stage after their stint on the filmset or in a television studio – by and large for the money – so audiences seem to feel that the human dimension of live performances still have greater pulling power than the celluloid imitations up on the screen. The National Opinion Poll figures certainly bear this out, in the detailed report carried out on behalf of the Society of West End Theatre.*

Furthermore they make fascinating reading. In answer to the question: 'What types of entertainment do you go to in central London?' the following answers emerged. (Interviewees were 'all adults who come into central London nowadays – more than one answer possible). No fewer than 35% gave theatre, opera, ballet or a show as their favourite entertainment; followed, in descending order, by 20% who gave restaurants; 18% who gave cinema; then 17% pubs; 12% exhibitions; 9% art galleries; 6% classical concerts; 5% rock concerts; 4% discos; 3% wine bars; and 1% fringe theatre.

The sampling used by NOP was the standard, and they claim the best of the various systems available to avoid any one type of bias, and covers the areas of inner London, outer London and the most heavily concentrated commuter areas in the Home Counties and beyond. The only possible bias I could detect was possibly the shifting flat-bed-sitter population, who might have escaped certain questions, thus undervaluing the numbers who attend rock concerts, discos and fringe theatre, perhaps even pubs. But that's only a guess.

The interviewing was in two stages. The first questioned everybody (chosen) on their chosen entertainment; the second quizzed more closely those who gave theatre as their top choice of entertainment, and established why this was so, what they liked and what they disliked about the entire evening, from the moment they set out from home, or the office, to the return journey homewards.

NOP summarised the overall results as follows.

1. In the eyes of the majority, London's main attraction (both to Londoners and visitors) is the extent and variety of entertainment it offers, and theatre is the principal form of entertainment sought out by respondents. London is thought of as the entertainment/theatrical capital of the world.

2. Most of the respondents described the West End theatre as unique, possessing its own 'magic spell', 'excitement' and

providing a very special 'sense of occasion' for them.

3. Within the GLC there are 1.3 million people who go to the theatre, of whom 100,000 go to the theatre at least once a month.

4. The composition of the West End theatre audience is more widely-spread in socio-economic terms and consists of a much greater proportion of younger people than might have been thought.

5. The greatest obstacle to theatregoing in London is related to travel in every form: rail, tube, bus, private car and parking. The most quoted factor deterring respondents from going to the theatre in London (or which causes them to go less frequently than before) was the cost and difficulty of getting into London and, in particular, the difficulty of getting home after the performance.

6. There is some evidence of price resistance, with many respondents referring to the cost of going to the theatre, but the NOP report makes it clear that this refers to the cost of the night-out as a whole (ie theatre tickets combined with travel, eating-out, etc). When pressed, respondents specifically stated that they regard the cost of the tickets themselves as fair and reasonable.

7. The main implication of the report is that the West End theatre industry must make theatre booking and theatre visits easier for the patron. It was clear from the report that the main thrust for theatre attendances should be within the GLC area itself where there would seem to be the greatest potential for growth.

The report also provides the industry with valuable information on the 'profile' of West End theatregoers; the readership of newspapers and periodicals; their preferred methods of booking and paying for theatre tickets.

It is worth remembering that this report was commissioned and largely paid for by the Society of West End Theatre, so of necessity the questions focus on this aspect of London entertainment. All the same, there are more general pointers throughout this report which throw light on other valuable areas, such as the exact number of readers for which publications and suggestions for say, a theatre programme on television along the lines of Barry Norman's *Film 81*, which is felt to be 'entertaining and informative', unlike critics, who were seen as too 'heavy' for most tastes.

Despite the growth in recent years of local theatres, especially civic theatres, outer London suburbs and neighbouring towns offered virtually no choice of entertainment, and nothing at all late at night, which is why it was felt to be worth putting up with the prices and hassle of coming to central London for a night out:

'London always proved somewhere to go at any time' says the report. 'It need not be expensive and one need not look far for entertainment. It has an "atmosphere", it "bustles", it's "different" at any time of day and night. The variety it offers is endless, from the very best to the worst'.

In most instances, theatregoers wanted to eat or drink or both, either before or after the show, and tended automatically to include the price of these sorts of items when assessing whether or not they could afford a theatre visit. This is clearly an opportunity for discount travel and catering deals to cash in on an audience which has admitted it is looking for ways to cut costs in the interests of another theatre outing.

Frequent theatre attendance was much more common among GLC residents. Indeed they accounted for about six times as many theatre visits as the outside GLC areas, that is to say those within a 40 mile radius and 26 selected towns more than 40 miles from London. Overseas visitors were not covered, although they are thought to form a significant part of the West End theatre audience. The next phase of the research programme will examine the attitudes of these, with assistance from tourist authorities.

The most revealing aspect of the report was the breakdown into age and socio-economic categories. 'Theatregoing is very much more common among the AB social class, 40% of whom claim to go, compared with 19% of C1 and C2s, and 4% of D and Es. However, since ABs represent only 17% of the population, while C1s and C2s are 59%, the latter is actually more important to the theatre numerically.

This translates into correspondingly interesting breakdowns in terms of the papers people read. The results obtained are shown in the accompanying graphs.

The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* appear to be the most widely-read daily newspapers. *The Guardian* becomes much

