

Audience Insight Wales is an Arts Council Wales project delivered by Clearview to help arts organisations understand and develop their audiences by collecting, analysing and interpreting data. This is the first of a series of bulletins exploring themes emerging from the data. For further information please go to <http://www.clearviewbusiness.com/solutions/audience-insight-wales/>

Getting bigger audiences for dance

In November 2015 a BBC news item confirmed something we already knew at the Torch Theatre – opera was a very popular artform in Wales and attendances for dance seem to be dying off. It's true, the BBC said so... <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-34591303>

And so did our box office data. Indeed, dance audiences had plummeted from over 1,500 attenders in 2008 to just 149 attenders in 2015.

Also, participation in dance and attendances for performances by local dance troupes was twice that of anything professional being offered on the stage.

So, never the twain shall meet when it comes to amateur and professional dance? There's virtually no crossover between audiences watching their children take part in dance performances and the professional touring dance companies. In fact only 1.23% of bookers for amateur or community dance also booked to see professional dance in the last four years.

So what did we do? We chucked dance out of the theatre's programming and concentrated on opera. OF COURSE WE DIDN'T. We decided to throw a year-long programme dedicated to dance.

Where did we start? Well, developing audiences long term for any art-form starts with programming. But they never listen to marketers do they, so what's to do? Programme the thing yourself!

With free reign, we built a programme that would grow with the audience so our first piece absolutely could not be a 'Wagner opera' (to continue the opera comparison). We wanted a light an accessible Puccini, at the very least.

Our first piece had to speak to a new audience, not alienate our current dance audience (all 149 of them) and most definitely appeal to younger people. So we turned to science...

Professor Brian Cox to be exact and a show called Pixelated Squid and The Universe. This was a dance double bill that was 'out of this world', combining comedy, film, drama and dance (no opera, they're all happy doing what they're doing, obviously).

Squid Universe, as it became known, was the launch-pad for our 'Year of Dance', with three curtain raiser slots for local dance troupes, free workshops with the dancers and, hopefully, a legacy that would give us the perfect blast off for our Year of Dance and the future of dance provision at the Torch.

To begin the night we showed everyone this trailer on the big screen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZDfKjBBf0c> - the trailer had a round of applause. Seriously.

Then the curtain raisers performed and our double bill of dance took to the stage to rapturous applause. People laughed, cried and shrieked at the end.



It worked, 215 people came to the opening event. And guess who enjoyed it the most...?

...and I probably should have told you this sooner, but I wanted to surprise you. Our Audience Insight Wales annual report showed just how important our frequent attenders are. 9% of our ticket buyers are responsible for 34% of our box office income. So we invited our top 35 customers. We sent them all two comps each and a

letter filled with love and gratitude for their loyalty. 17 of them came... opera-goers, serious drama attenders, ballet enthusiasts, classical music lovers...

We gave them a huge, dancey hug for being our best customers and d'you know what? It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings (or dances), they trusted us, they gave dance a go when they had never considered it before and they loved it!

Email from Dawn and James Brown (NT Live Broadcast lovers): *"My husband and I were absolutely thrilled to have been invited to the event and more so with the amazing quality of the evening- nothing short of what we expect from the Torch. We were blown away by the performances... I had not seriously considered ballet but now we are taking a group to watch Swan Lake. Thank you again for the evening it was very much appreciated. We continue to spread the word... we are very lucky to have [you] on our doorstep."*

Denise Stanley (hard core opera attender) emailed us: *"Thank you! Whenever I hear Brian Cox on the TV now I will have the image in my head of the dancers using their belly buttons as his mouth!! I was bowled over by the ex Cirque Du Soleil dancers... I googled them on my return home. And the Dutch (?) dancer whose name you had practiced was also fantastic-her happiness was infectious. I also enjoyed the programme that the young dancers put together - what a fabulous opportunity they were given to share a stage with professional dancers. It is great to see The Torch initiating and driving a 'Year of Dance'. It's also great that the Torch can attract great performers and dance companies to West Wales."*

By the way, I don't practice Dutch names for fun – to open the evening I stood on stage and I spoke to the audience directly about dance, why we were doing a year of dance and how I wanted the audience to get in touch with me and tell me what they thought. They did and they want more of it.

So, where are we now? Well, with only four events down and ten more to go in our 'Year of Dance' we've already sold 1,324 tickets (170 of these to the under 26 age group) and we're only five months into the year.

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