

Dec-2000

South Shore Theater: Myth and Reality

Stephen Levine

Bridgewater State College, slevine@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Levine, Stephen (2000). South Shore Theater: Myth and Reality. *Bridgewater Review*, 19(2), 3-5.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol19/iss2/5



SOUTH SHORE THEATER: MYTH AND REALITY

BY STEPHEN LEVINE

MYTH #1: *Sports viewing and activity are overwhelmingly the peoples' entertainment, and the arts and culture are only for the few and the elite.*

MYTH #2: *Massachusetts south of Boston is a cultural wasteland in which there is no measurable theater activity.*

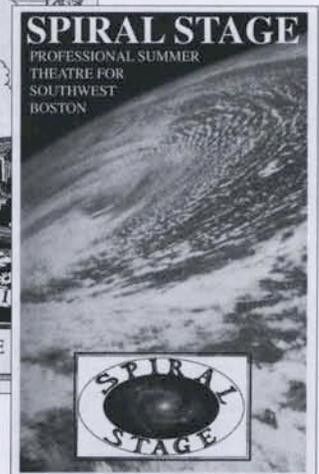
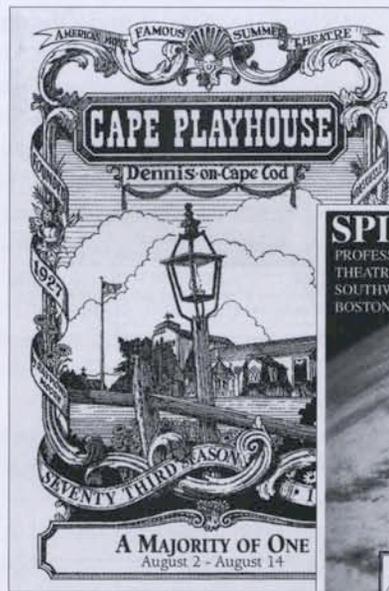
MYTH #3: *Communities depend on real jobs with real economic impact such as those in construction and the information industry. Everyone knows there are no important jobs in theater and that theater has no real economic impact on the region.*

Those three statements have the power of popular wisdom, and they seem to be louder than any voices that might contradict them. Despite popular wisdom, the facts say that each of the above statements is a myth. The reality behind the first myth is that in New York the Metropolitan Museum of Art has greater annual attendance than the Yankees, Knicks, and Rangers combined. The three top cultural institutions in Boston have greater attendance than the Red Sox, Bruins, and Celtics combined. The reality behind the second myth is that there are more professional theaters, community theaters, schools of theater, college, public and private school theaters producing more plays on the South Shore and Cape Cod than there are in Boston. My work leads me to estimate that total participation and audience attendance exceeded 300,000 people last year! I also estimate that the total effect in dollars on the regional economy exceeded \$20,000,000 last year. (The exact numbers are still being calculated as part of my study to be completed December, 2000.) The reality behind the third myth is that in the United States employment in the arts is greater than in many essential fields. For example, in 1997, the arts accounted for 6% of the Gross

National Product (the construction industry accounted for 4.8%) and the arts employed 2.7% of the American workforce, or 3.2 million individuals (agriculture employed 2.6%). In New England, job growth in the arts and culture world exceeded every other field last year; and south of Boston, I estimate that employment in theater included over 170 full-time jobs and over 1200 seasonal or part-time jobs. By comparison, the region's vaunted cranberry industry likely has less than one tenth that amount of employment.

It is important to understand that at the root of this issue is access to public money. Our taxes are invested in a wide range of activities in the Commonwealth, and decisions about how they will be spent are fought out in the state house and the court of public opinion. Take, for example, the campaign this summer by the Boston Red Sox to convince legislators, the governor and the public that the region would be wise to spend huge amounts of public money (\$312 million was the most recent estimate I read in the *Boston Globe*) to help build a new Fenway Park and the infrastructure such as roads and parking, on which it would depend. To bolster their argument that the region would benefit, Red Sox executives pointed to the importance of the Red Sox in making Boston a "world class city", and to the economic benefits of having a major league team that draws two million fans a year and sells lots of hot dogs and ball caps. So, people make both cultural and economic arguments to support their right to dip into the public treasury for the special activity in which they believe.

I want to smash myths about theater and the arts because I want more support, especially public support, for theater in our region. The problem is that the myths are so pervasive that they stand in the way. The reality has been obscure and unrecognized, like the reality of an underground economy that secretly adds up to a \$20,000,000 effect. Consider the





following examples that may be news to you. There is a little, funky professional theater named Wellfleet Harbor Actor's Theater, with Jeff Zinn as resident director and Gip Hoppe as resident playwright, which has sent plays on to Boston and Off-Broadway in New York. Did you know that? There is a well-attended private school of theater over the old appliance store in East Bridgewater, headed by Teresa Capacione. There is an enormous theater program (winning more state titles than the football team) at Brockton High School, under the direction of Carol Thomas. There is a large, adventurous

community group named Company Theater, directed by Zoe Bradford and Jody Saucerman who saved a former professional theater in Norwell. There is even a nationally honored theater program at Bridgewater State College. Did you know that? (A more complete listing of theater groups, including professional, amateur and education-affiliated groups are listed on page 5.) The facts will show that all of the theaters in the region add more to their communities than they receive, much more than popular wisdom has allowed. I want you to know that all of the theaters add much more than they receive economically as well as culturally.

Old arguments touting the artistic and educational value of the arts (and particularly of theater) in the cities and towns south of Boston have simply not produced sufficient attention and support. Though I strongly agree with such arguments, and made them myself in the past, they are not being repeated here because they simply have not been effective. As a society we seem to measure everything in terms of money, but the dollar argument for theater in the region has

not yet been made loudly enough to overcome the myths connected with it. I hope to counter the myths about theater with concrete data demonstrating the scope of the economic impact of all the theater on the South Shore and Cape Cod. I hope to let the factual reality of dollars argue for theater louder than the artistic and educational values have ever done. Can you hear it?

There have been studies measuring such things as the economic impact of a new Fenway Park for the Red Sox, the cranberry crop, Canadian whiskey, crime in Massachusetts and building the Big Dig in Boston. Economic impact studies have been conducted whenever public funds are to be spent on an activity in our society. The term, "economic impact," means measuring the influence of an activity by examining all of the ramifications that activity has on the dollar value of employment, property costs, goods and services produced, income and expenditures, as well as other business generated in a specific population. And "gross national product" is used as a measure of all the economic activity in the United States. It does not measure the spiritual or artistic worth of an activity except as each generates dollars spent.

In my study I am searching for a kind of "regional theater product" composed of all the economic activity related to theater. That is, I am trying to calculate how much money is spent in each of our communities that would not have been spent without its theater activities. One very important aspect of that measurement has already been widely accepted by economists: a basic formula (often called an economic model) for calculating business generated. As a general rule it can be assumed that every dollar spent directly producing and attending theater in the region creates three dollars worth of other business. This three-to-one ratio takes into account the ripple effect of increases of property costs, employment, goods and services produced, income and expenditures for businesses that benefit indirectly from theater activity. Every dollar directly spent producing a play also means another three dollars spent in the community by actors and audience on restaurants, gas stations, clothing stores, local/state taxes, and so on. Every dollar directly spent producing a play also means another three dollars spent in the community on increased employment, inventory diversification, capital improvements, depreciation, and so on by accountants, lumber yards, fabric stores, lighting manufacturers, installers and renters, and others. When I estimated that the total effect of theater activity in the region exceeded twenty million dollars I used the standard ratio of three to one to calculate that figure.

There is yet another aspect of the regional theater product that is much more difficult to measure: donated goods and services. These are called in-kind contributions, and must be counted along with other contributed income from sources such as corporations, foundations, individuals, as well as federal, state and local grants. In-kind contributions represent more dollar value by any measure of theater than all of the dollar contributions combined. My estimation that the number of participants and audience in theater in the region

exceeds three hundred thousand includes its approximately seven thousand volunteer participants. Of course, many of the volunteers, employees and audience members may have attended and been counted more than once (just as the Red Sox or any other business includes many individuals who attend and are counted more the once). In fact, my estimate that the total economic effect of theater in the region exceeds twenty million dollars could increase significantly. I have not accounted for any in-kind contributions in my estimate, simply because it is taking much longer than I anticipated to calculate the fair dollar value of used goods and volunteer services.

Until recently, my personal interest in theater has been exclusively artistic and educational. This economic impact study is something I had always hoped that someone else would do, but in my 32 years in southeastern Massachusetts, no one has. I finally realized that if it is needed enough, I'd better do it. Other studies have been done, nationally and in New England, but their primary focus has been not-for-profit incorporated arts and cultural organizations in major urban centers. Research in Massachusetts, for example, included only not-for-profit corporations in Boston. The

studies excluded for-profit and unincorporated arts organizations as well as all organizations outside of Boston. Because most theater production outside of Boston is for-profit or unincorporated, there is a significant gap in the research on the economic impact of theater in Massachusetts. Consequently, two unique aspects of this study are: first, the inclusion of data collected from all organizations engaged in theater; and second, the limitation to a geographic area outside a major urban center, in this case southeastern Massachusetts. If you measure the value of your community in money, then you should hear this loud and clear: we need to support our local theater.

Stephen Levine is Professor of Communications Studies and Theatre Arts.

Editor's note: Dr. Stephen Levine of the Department of Communication Studies and Theater Arts is in the midst of a study of "The Economic Impact of Theater production in Southeastern Massachusetts." During his sabbatical leave in the spring semester and summer of 1999 he began collecting data for his study and is currently working toward completion of the project.

Professional theater groups, professional touring theater groups, community theater groups, amateur touring theater groups and theater groups in public and private educational institutions

Abington
Acushnet
Attleboro (Attleboro Community Theater)
Avon
Barnstable
Berkley
Bourne (Theater on the Bay)
Braintree (Braintree Curtain)
Brewster (Cape Repertory)
Bridgewater (Bridgewater State College)
Brockton (Massasoit Community College)
Buzzard's Bay
Canton
Carver (King Richard's Faire)
Cedarville
Chatham (Chatham Drama Guild)
Cohasset (Cohasset Dramatic Club; South Shore Music Circus)
Cotuit (Cotuit Center for Arts)
Dartmouth (UMASS-Dartmouth)
Dennis (Cape Playhouse)

Dighton
Duxbury (Duxbury Bay Players)
E. Bridgewater
Eastham
Easton (Maplewood Day Camp; Stonehill College)
Fairhaven (Bijou)
Fall River (Bristol Community College Seton Academy; Metropolitan Players; Fall River Little Theater)
Falmouth (Highfield Theater; Cape Cod Theatre Project; College Light Opera Company. Cape Cod Conservatory)
Foxborough (Orpheum Theater)
Halifax
Hanover
Hanson
Harwich (Harwich Junior Theater)
Hingham (Hingham Civic Music Theatre; Hingham Cabaret)
Holbrook
Hull (Hull Performing Arts)
Hyannis (Cape Cod Community College; Hyannis Melody Tent)
Kingston
Lakeville
Mansfield (Great Woods/Tweeter Center)
Marion (Marion Arts Center)
Marshfield (Family Performing Arts Center)

Mashpee (Oversoul Theater, Talking Drum; Boch Center For The Performing Arts)
Mattapoisett (Old Rochester Summer Adventures in Learning; Old Rochester)
Middleborough (Black and White Theater; Nemasket River Productions; Bertwood School of Performing Arts Lorna School of Perf. Arts)
New Bedford (Zeiterion ;Your Theater; GalleryX; Festival Theater of New Bedford)
North Attleborough
Norton (Wheaton College; Norton Singers-Wheaton College; Charminade Singers-Wheaton College)
Norwell Company Theater
Onset
Orleans (Academy for Performing Arts)
Pembroke
Plymouth (Priscilla Beach Theater; Acting Workshop; Plymouth Plantation; LAF Productions; Plymouth Library)
Plympton
Pocasset
Provincetown (Theater Company; Provincetown Repertory Theater; Provincetown Playhouse)

Quincy (Quincy Dinner Theater; Children's Theatre Workshop; JM Productions; Rafael's Jim Bright)
Randolph
Rehoboth
Rockland
Sagamore
Sandwich (Glasstown Players)
Scituate
Seekonk
Sharon (Student Dinner Theatre)
Somerset
Stoughton (Little Theatre of Stoughton)
Swansea
Taunton Star Players; Industrial Theater
Truro (Provincetown Playhouse; Payomet Players)
Wareham
Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater
West Bridgewater
Westport (Lewis School of Theatre Arts; Theatre Company)
Weymouth
Whitman
Woods Hole Theater Company
Yarmouth