

The Importance of Ticket Prices for Theatre Patrons

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Most authors¹ who have measured consumer demand for the performing arts have found that it is relatively insensitive to price.² This apparent price insensitivity suggests that performing arts organizations have a certain amount of flexibility, within the limits of which it would be possible for them to raise their prices without causing a significant decrease in demand, at the same time as it increases revenues. A study by the Ford Foundation (1974) shows that demand for theatre tends to be particularly inelastic for plays that become the main theatre event of a season. In the case of such “hits,” consumers are willing to pay a relatively high price for tickets.

Aside from price, the main variables that have been used to explain demand for the performing arts are consumers’ income and the price of substitute products.³ It is interesting to note that the majority of these authors consider cinema a substitute for the performing arts. It would seem moreover that, independently of the price variable, theatre enthusiasts tend to be film enthusiasts as well (Colbert, 1997). Withers (1980), on the other hand, considers reading and recreation as substitutes, while Gapinski (1984) and Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (1993) include cinema as well as reading and recreation. In a different study, Gapinski (1986) shows that the other performing arts (dance, concerts and opera) con-

stitute very good substitutes for theatre, with a resulting interdependence at the level of price.

Using this basic model as a starting point, some authors have explored other sources in their attempt to explain demand for the performing arts. Bonato et al. (1990) proposed using explanatory variables such as the possession of a television set, the number of performances, the presence of tourists, and the level of education; the first two variables proved to be significant. At the same time, Bonato’s study found that the number of tourists in audiences was quite limited, that income and education level were correlated, and that the proportion of educated people in audiences was high. Touchstone (1980) found that the elasticity of demand for the performing arts varied in relation to the size of the budget of the organization concerned: in the case of organizations with larger budgets, demand was less elastic to price than was the case with organizations with more modest budgets. Similarly, Lange and Kuksetich (1984) found that demand for large-budget orchestras was less price sensitive than demand for smaller orchestras. In the same vein, Greckel and Felton (1987) established a link between price sensitivity and the reputation of the orchestra, showing that the more renowned the orchestra, the less consumers tended to be sensitive to price. Furthermore, these researchers, along with Felton (1989), recommended that season subscribers’ demand for the performing arts

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be considered separately from that of non-subscribers, since they display different properties: indeed, subscribers' demand for the theatre would appear to be more sensitive to price than that of non-subscribers. According to the same authors, income tends to have a positive but non-significant influence on subscriber demand, while some results indicate that the income elasticity of non-subscribers' demand tends to be negative. In an other study, Felton (1992) obtained similar results, but with a few surprises; notably, certain price elasticities proved to be positive, which runs counter to the law of demand. According to the author, these results indicate that, in certain cases, price may be perceived as a measure of quality.

Throsby (1983) was the first researcher to factor in the role of quality considerations in demand for the performing arts. Before Throsby, economists who analyzed the economics of the arts held the quality variable constant – when they did not simply omit it from their models altogether – having once specified it in a production, cost, or utility function. Throsby (1983) measured quality in terms of the following five objective criteria, those likely to play a role in the consumer's buying decision:

- nature of source material (i.e., repertoire classification: classic work, modern work by a known author, modern work by an unknown author, etc.);
- overall standard of script, text, score, translation;
- standard of performance (acting, dancing, singing, playing of instruments);

- standard of production (direction, interpretation, choreography, conducting, arranging);

- standard of design (scenery, props, costumes, lighting).

In this study, the author undertook to evaluate these variables by means of a press review. He succeeded in showing that criteria relating to the quality of a production had a greater influence on demand for a play than did ticket prices. Throsby's study has the merit of having explored new territory in the study of consumer demand for the performing arts.

The work that was most inspired by Throsby's article is undeniably that of Abbé-Decarroux (1994). In his study, which focused specifically on theatre, Abbé-Decarroux used five criteria similar to those proposed by Throsby, namely, the repertoire classification of the production, the reputation of the playwright, of the play, of the director and of the distribution (ranked on a scale from 1 to 6), and whether the play being staged was an in-house production. Most of these variables proved significant in explaining demand. Moreover, the author refined his analysis of demand by using two different price categories as a dependent variable, instead of using an average price as his predecessors had done. The results were striking; they indicated that demand for regularly priced tickets indeed tended to be inelastic to price, while demand for reduced ticket prices⁴ proved to be elastic to price. These results thus indicate a possible direction for price discrimination.

The contribution of Abbé-Decarroux and Grinn (1992) to the analysis of demand for the performing arts was to introduce a notion

ABSTRACT

Among studies seeking to explain variations in theatre demand, a large number use price as an explanatory variable, while some authors try to analyze the influence of variables such as: the size of the theatre's budget, the quality of the production, whether it is an in-house production, the effect of substitute products and the day of the week.

In a survey we conducted among the audiences of seven theatres varying in size, we found a diversity of attitudes regarding ticket prices, not only between subscribers and non-subscribers, but also within each of these consumer groups. What our study shows is that for one segment of this clientele, the main factor limiting the number of theatre outings is a lack of time, while the second group of consumers cites the price of theatre tickets as the decisive factor.

KEYWORDS

Pricing, theatre, consumer behaviour

of perceived risk with regard to the quality⁵ of the production staged. The authors use this concept of quality to explain the overrepresentation of young people in theatre audiences compared to their representation at the opera or at concerts. According to these authors, theatre presents a higher level of risk than the two other – more classical – art forms. Indeed, because young people may be more willing to take risks than the public at large, they are likely, all other things being equal, to attend the theatre more readily than their elders.

Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette (1993) used this notion of risk as the basis for the elaboration of a model explaining the discretionary decision to attend the theatre as well as the frequency with which consumers undertake such outings. They used individual rather than aggregate data,⁶ which allowed them to include sociodemographic variables in their model. Among other things, they found that certain variables – the fact of owning a dishwasher, more than one car, a personal computer, of not having children, of having a university education (as opposed to attending a vocational school), and of being employed in a management or supervisory capacity – had a positive effect on demand for the theatre.

In his 1994 article, Throsby synthesizes previous studies and evaluates the potential role of taste in explaining consumer demand in its application to the arts and suggests further lines of development. Once again, credit is due to Throsby for opening up this avenue of study. Of course, sceptics will argue that it is absurd to attempt to provide a rational explanation for behaviour that is rooted in the realm of imagination, spontaneity, and emotion. Throsby maintains that, while this may be true on an individual basis, the aggregation

of consumer and artist behaviours indicates that they can be effectively modelled in accordance with the rules of economic theory.

Thus, Throsby proposes the elaboration of a model in which taste would be an endogenous variable. Indeed, basing his argument on the household production model, Throsby maintains that:

“The relative consumption of the arts will rise over time, not because of a shift in tastes, but because the shadow price of the arts falls as experience, understanding and other human capital attributes associated with the arts are acquired.” (Throsby, 1994, p. 3)

The notion of “acquired taste” would appear to be a decisive variable, particularly in explaining the consumption of the so-called “high” performing arts such as opera, “serious” theatre, classical or modern ballet, classical music and all interpretations of experimental or avant-garde art (as opposed to variety shows, the circus, and musicals). Throsby predicts that the more important the notion of acquired taste becomes, the more people will be insensitive to price.

Research Questions

Canadian theatre companies that have non-profit status are heavily subsidized by the state; in the province of Quebec, these companies receive an average of 49.4% of their revenue from the various levels of government (a company can receive subsidies from the federal, provincial and municipal governments simultaneously). However, at a time when all of Canada’s public administrations are forced to cut their operating budgets,

RÉSUMÉ

Parmi toutes les études qui ont été réalisées afin d’expliquer les fluctuations en termes de demande de spectacles de théâtre, la plupart évoquent le prix comme variable explicative. D’autres cependant, concluent sur le fait que divers facteurs entrent en jeu tels le budget du théâtre, le type de pièce (création, reprise), sa qualité, l’importance des produits substitués et le jour de la semaine.

Suite à un sondage effectué auprès des publics de sept théâtres de taille différente à Montréal, il s’est avéré que les attitudes face au prix des billets différaient non seulement entre les abonnés et les non-abonnés, mais également au sein de ces deux groupes de consommateurs. Finalement il en ressort que, si pour les uns le principal obstacle aux sorties théâtrales est le manque de temps, en revanche, pour les autres, c’est le prix du billet qui joue.

MOTS CLÉS

Établissement du prix, théâtre, comportement du consommateur

the amount of available funds for the arts has dropped dramatically. In view of this alarming situation, we wanted to examine whether there are categories of theatregoers who are willing to pay more for their tickets, thereby helping theatre companies to offset the loss of revenue from funding agencies. We therefore decided to survey subscribers and non-subscribers on the matter of variations in theatre ticket prices.

Data Collection

The data were gathered by means of a questionnaire distributed to audiences at seven theatres in Montreal (Canada). This approach ensured that we would have access to the people directly concerned in our study, and thus potentially more interested in answering our questions than the general public. At the same time, however, our method excluded individuals who might attend the theatre if ticket prices were lower. In choosing between this loss of information and the cost of finding individuals who would be interested in theatre were it not for the price of tickets, we decided in favour of the first choice.

The questionnaire was divided into six sections, including two subsections that were mutually exclusive, depending on whether the respondent was a subscriber or a single-ticket purchaser (non-subscriber). One of the sections was designed to test five variables: the size of the theatre's budget, the quality of the production, whether it was an in-house production, the effect of substitute products and the day of the week.

In an article by Touchstone (1980), it was found that the size of the budget of a performing arts organization could have an impact on demand. To verify this phenomenon, we divided our sample theatres into three groups according to the size of their budget: large (three companies), intermediate (two companies) and small (two companies).

For their part, Throsby (1982) and Abbé-Decarroux (1994) demonstrated that the quality of the production is an important explanatory variable in demand for theatre. In our study, the variable used to evaluate the quality of a production was whether or not the play enjoyed an extended run. According to Greckel and Felton (1987), demand by theatregoers appears to be influenced by whether the work presented is an in-house production. We thus undertook to test for the presence of this phenomenon in our sample. We also wanted to test for the effect of substitute products, as a number of other researchers have done; cinema was used as the substitute product. Finally, we set out to determine the effect on consumption of variable rates between weekends and weekdays.

The survey was conducted between January 27 and March 9, 1994. A pre-test of the questionnaire was performed. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to members of the audience before the beginning of the play or during intermission; close to 90% of the surveys were suitably completed, giving us a sample of 760 people,⁷ 37.1% of whom were subscribers, while 62.9% were non-subscribers. Finally, the job of entering the data in an information system was entrusted to a specialized firm.

RESUMEN

Entre los estudios que han tratado de explicar los cambios en la demanda teatral, algunos autores sostienen que éstos se deben al precio de las entradas, mientras otros analizan la influencia de otras variables, como por ejemplo: el presupuesto del teatro, la calidad de la producción, si se trata de una producción interna, el efecto que causan los productos sucedáneos y, por último, el día en que se presenta el espectáculo.

En un estudio conducido entre el público de siete teatros con salas de distinto tamaño, encontramos que las actitudes varían con respecto al precio de las entradas, no sólo entre abonados y no abonados, sino también dentro de cada uno de estos grupos. El resultado del estudio demuestra que, en el caso de uno de los segmentos de la audiencia, el factor principal que limita la cantidad de salidas al teatro es la falta de tiempo, mientras que para el segundo grupo, el factor de limitación resulta ser el precio de las entradas.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Fijación de precios, teatro, comportamiento del consumidor

Results

Sociodemographic Profile

The sociodemographic profile of respondents conforms in every respect to that found in all studies of theatre patronage around the world (Colbert, 1993); women comprise 61.4% of the sample, and university graduates 54.1% (65.6% if students are excluded).⁸ The fact that 44.6% of respondents who are not students declared a personal income of over \$40,000 shows that personal income is tied to the level of education.⁹ Very few people in the sample (10.9%) work in the primary, manufacturing, construction, transportation or public service sectors; rather, most are professionals and white collar workers. It should be noted that 13.2% of respondents work in the arts sector.

The sociodemographic profile of subscribers was similar to that of non-subscribers, with one exception; people under the age of 30 made up for only 11.5% of subscribers, while this group made up for 51.5% of non-subscribers.

Profile of Non-Subscribers

We identified two categories of people who had bought individual tickets to a performance.

An analysis of the socio-economic variables reveals that the typical consumer in the first group is a woman between the age of 40 and 50. She is married and has one or more children. She is a professional (or consultant) and holds a university degree and a full-time job. Her annual income, before tax, is between \$40,000 and \$59,000.

The purchasing-habit variables reveal that our typical consumer tends to be a regular patron of the theatre she attended at the time of the survey. This consumer has been a patron of the theatre for between fifteen and twenty-four years. She sees four or five plays a year and does not have the time to see more. She generally goes to the theatre in the company of her spouse, purchasing tickets on the day of the performance. She chooses her seat from amongst the best available at the time of purchase.

Among the decision variables, reviews of the play have the greatest influence on our typical consumer's decision to see a given play. Her choice of a particular venue is thus based on the play being staged there, as well as on the reputation and renown of the theatre. The decision to see a play on a given evening tends to be spontaneous, since it is often motivated by the sudden desire for entertainment.

It should be noted here that these results agree in many respects with those obtained by other researchers before us. The socio-economic profile, for instance, is basically the same as that found in the literature (see, among others, Baumol and Bowen, 1996, and Globerman and Book, 1974). Moreover, the important role played by the renown of an arts organization in the consumer's decision corroborates the results of researchers such as Greckel and Felton (1987). The fact that our respondent has been a theatre patron for over fifteen years, that she sees four to five plays a year, and that she is a "regular customer" at a particular venue bear similarity to the results obtained by Throsby (1994), according to whom "acquired taste" is positively correlated to demand for the theatre.

According to the socio-economic variables, the typical consumer in the second group significantly pays a lower price for his ticket than other theatre patrons, and tends to be a man between the age of 14 and 24. He is a college student with an annual income below \$10,000. His reasons for not seeing more plays per year (on average, he sees one or no plays) are either that he is ill informed of the plays being staged or that he is deferred by the price of tickets. It is interesting to note that this group can be divided into three categories: students who come to the theatre because they are required to do so by their school, young people who come with friends or family because they are encouraged to do so and, lastly, people who work in the arts field and attend at least six productions a year.

Not surprisingly, it is the consumers in our first group of non-subscribers who declared a willingness to pay more for theatre tickets, while those in the second group were more opposed to higher ticket prices. This finding is understandable, given the different income levels of the two groups. In addition, it is interesting to note that respondents in both of

these categories declared they would be prepared to pay more for tickets to plays given an extended run; this information suggests that ticket prices for such plays could be increased, since potential patrons attach greater value to the production and are therefore willing to pay more for their ticket.

The questionnaire allowed us to test five additional variables: the size of the theatre company's budget, the quality of the production, whether it was an in-house production, cinema (as the substitute product) and the day of the week on which the play was staged (weekday versus weekend). Our results proved similar to those obtained by the principal researchers using these variables; namely, that consumers seem to be willing to pay more to see "in-house productions" staged at a major venue and for which there are additional performances. The reader will recall that the latter criterion was used to judge the quality of a play.

To test for the "cinema effect" of Tuesday evenings (Montreal cinemas offer half-price movie tickets on Tuesdays), we compared the answers obtained on a Tuesday with those obtained on a Thursday at the same theatre. Results showed that, on average, people paid more for their theatre ticket on Tuesday than on Thursday. This unexpected finding would appear to indicate either that cinema is not a substitute for theatre (at least not for people who attend theatre on a Tuesday evening), or that these people have other opportunities to go to the movies on evenings when reduced prices are offered. To measure the "weekday/weekend" effect, we used the same method with data gathered on a Thursday and a Saturday. This time the results came closer to our expectations, showing that weekend theatre patrons derive greater satisfaction from a play because they accepted to pay more, on average, to obtain a ticket for Saturday's performance than they would have paid on a Thursday.

Profile of Season Subscribers

There is a higher proportion of women in the category of subscribers than in that of non-subscribers. There are comparatively more couples in the subscriber group, and they have, on average, more children. Season subscribers also tend to be older. On the one hand, few are under the age of thirty, which is

contrary to what was observed among single-ticket purchasers. On the other hand, retired people are more likely to purchase a subscription than individual tickets. In addition to retired people, people with full-time jobs also have a greater chance of belonging to the subscriber group. Their income is higher than that of theatre patrons in other categories. They tend to work as consultants or professionals. This seems to confirm, yet again, Throsby's hypothesis regarding the acquired taste for theatre.

As was to be expected, the majority of season subscribers were on their sixth outing (at least) to the venue where we met them. These patrons seem to view an evening at the theatre as a social outing to be undertaken in the company of one's spouse and friends.¹⁰ They purchase a subscription not only out of interest for theatre, but also to ensure they obtain good seats. More than a third said they had been subscribers for over six years and most of them see all the plays to which their subscription entitles them. They select seats that offer a good price-quality ratio.

If they choose to purchase a subscription to a particular venue, their decision is influenced mainly by the reputation and renown of that venue. They attend the theatre on their usual evening out.

Over half of subscribers attend more productions than the four or five included in their subscription, and would see more still if they had the time. The majority of subscribers have been theatre patrons for about ten years.

As with non-subscribers, we found that the group of theatre subscribers can also be divided into two categories:

Those with a personal income of over \$50,000, and who are university graduates, would be willing to pay up to 15% more for their subscription; they also consider that higher ticket prices are justified in the case of plays that have been granted an extended run. The main reason cited for not attending the theatre more often is a lack of time, and not the price of tickets.

In the category of "other variables," respondents who appreciate classical plays or plays written by Quebec authors, and those who do not mind lengthy productions, tend to be more receptive to price increases. This is equally true of subscribers who are interested

in film, visual arts, or outings of a scientific nature. Note that, in both of the latter markets, we found a significant proportion of respondents willing to pay a higher price for their ticket. Finally, subscribers to theatres having an intermediate budget are more receptive to price increases than subscribers to theatres having a large budget. As for the quality variable (whether or not the play was given an extended run), it proved significant in explaining the willingness of subscribers to pay 5% more for their subscription; as expected, respondents were willing to pay more for high-quality plays than for others.

On the other hand, respondents in the second group (retirees or people personal incomes under \$50,000) are refractory to an increase in the price of subscriptions. A portion of the respondents in this group claim that the number of their theatre outings is limited by ticket prices. In the category of "other variables," respondents who hold a subscription to major venues seem to find the present cost of their subscription abundantly high.

Conclusion

Our study allows us to add a nuance to the distinction between subscribers and non-subscribers made by Felton (1989) on the basis of the price elasticity of the first group and the price inelasticity of the second group. Indeed, we found that there are actually two categories of consumers in both the subscriber and the non-subscriber groups; consumers who are prepared to accept a price increase and those who are not. In general, the first group is more affluent and educated than the second. Thus, not only do theatre patrons as a group not form a monolithic unit in terms of the importance they accord to the price of theatre tickets, but there is also a lack of homogeneity within each group of subscribers and non-subscribers. For instance, low-income subscribers and non-subscribers are more reluctant to accept price increases, while the opposite can be said of subscribers and non-subscribers with a higher income level. Moreover, the first group cites the price factor to explain why they do not attend the theatre more often, while the second group tends to

single out the time factor as an explanation.

Two studies on the subject carried out among the general population in Canada reach opposite conclusions; indeed, according to Cultur'inc. and Decima Research (1992), the main obstacle to greater theatre attendance is the price of tickets, while for Pronovost (1990) it is patrons' lack of time. Our study allows us to reconcile these findings by showing that while the price of tickets is in fact the main obstacle for low-income theatre patrons, a lack of time is the main obstacle for high-income theatre patrons.

It is important to re-emphasize the fact that consumers attach greater value to successful plays (those given an extended run), and are, on the whole, willing to pay more to attend such performances. This confirms the importance of the product itself in the field of the performing arts; indeed, the decisive criterion among potential patrons is the interest the proposed product inspires in them: the greater this interest, the less their sensitivity to price.

Arts enterprises often follow the strategy of offering reduced ticket prices to attract people who are not in the habit of consuming their product. Our study provides added confirmation of the validity of this practice. Throsby (1994) has already shown that a positive correlation between "acquired tastes" and the demand for theatre exists; indeed, the portion of our sample characterized as frequent consumers of theatre mentioned that their interest in this art form increased with consumption. Thus, the strategy of attracting non-consumers by means of lower ticket prices can be seen as a good way to help accustom people to the theatre, if it succeeds in increasing their level of patronage; this also applies to students. There is good reason to believe that these "new recruits" will eventually agree to pay regular prices for their tickets.

Through this study, we were also able to corroborate the results obtained by several researchers mentioned at the beginning of the article. Among non-subscribers, purchasing decisions are influenced by factors such as the size of the company, the quality of the production, whether it is an in-house production, substitute products and day of the week, while the size of the theatre company and quality appear to play a more significant role among subscribers.

Notes

1. Baumol and Bowen, 1966; Moore, 1966; Withers, 1980; Touchstone, 1980; Gapinski, 1984 and 1986; Lange and Luksetich, 1984; Bonato et al., 1990 have studied the demand for theatre in particular.
2. The price elasticities observed generally range from -0.1 to -0.7 .
3. See for example Baumol and Bowen, 1966; Withers, 1980; Touchstone, 1980; Gapinski, 1984 and 1986; Bonato et al., 1990; Lévy-Garboua and Montmarquette, 1993.
4. Students, senior citizens and the unemployed are often offered reduced prices.
5. For the purposes of this article, "quality" is defined in subjective terms rather than on the basis of aesthetic criteria.
6. Data gathered by the French Ministry of Culture based on a sample of 8,000 people.
7. In order to determine what categories of theatregoers derive a relatively high marginal utility, we used multivariate contingency tables and Pearson tests, also known as chi-square tests. This test is all the more appropriate here, considering that most of the variables under consideration are qualitative in nature. The data was processed using the SPSS software program. The contingency tables made it possible to establish links between the different values assumed by the variables, while the Pearson test served to verify whether the observed correlations were significant.
8. According to Statistics Canada, the proportion of university graduates in Canada is 13%.
9. According to Statistics Canada, the average personal income in Canada was \$19,200 in 1992.
10. For a more detailed discussion of the reasons influencing theatre attendance, see Gainer, 1995.

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