

Highbury Players Audience Survey by our Marketing Committee

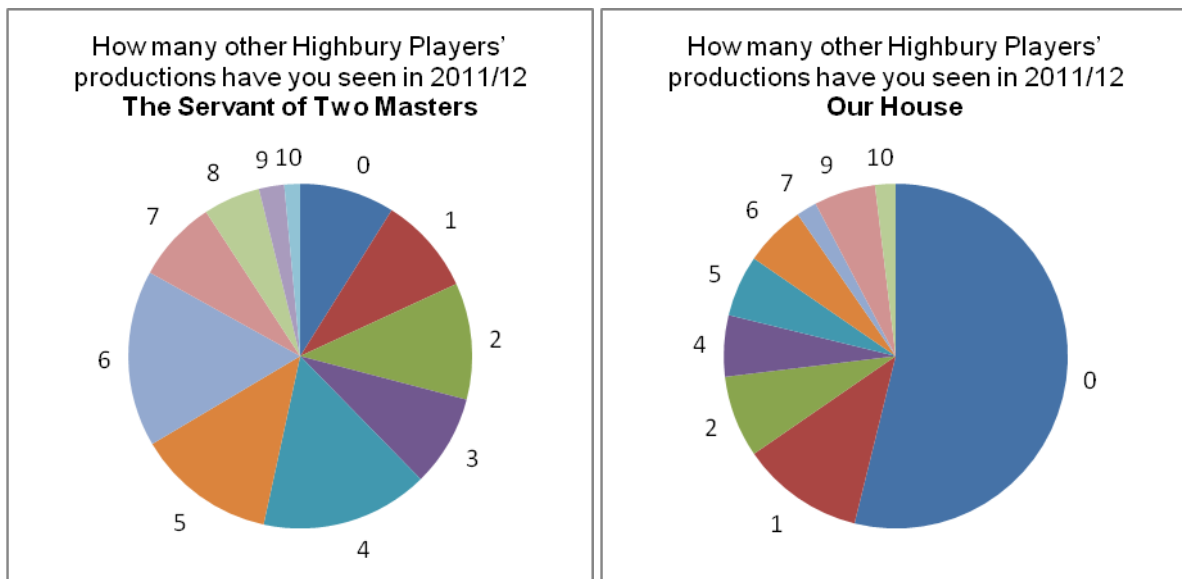
At the end of the 2011/12 season, we invited the audiences of *The Servant of Two Masters* and *Our House* to fill in a short survey which was designed to help us find out more about their theatre-going, how satisfied they were with 'the Highbury experience' and what suggestions they had about how we might improve. This article lets you know what our audiences said and responds to some of the comments and suggestions that were made.

Survey results

More of the *Servant* audience filled in the survey than the *Our House* audience, but we were really pleased with the overall response rate of 31% and would like to thank everyone who took part. We have had a lot of useful feedback and some great ideas to work on.

How often do people come to the theatre?

Over half the *Servant* respondents had seen five or more of our main productions last season, although nearly 10% said that was the first production they had seen. In contrast, just over half the *Our House* respondents were coming for the first time. The graphs show the differences between these two groups.

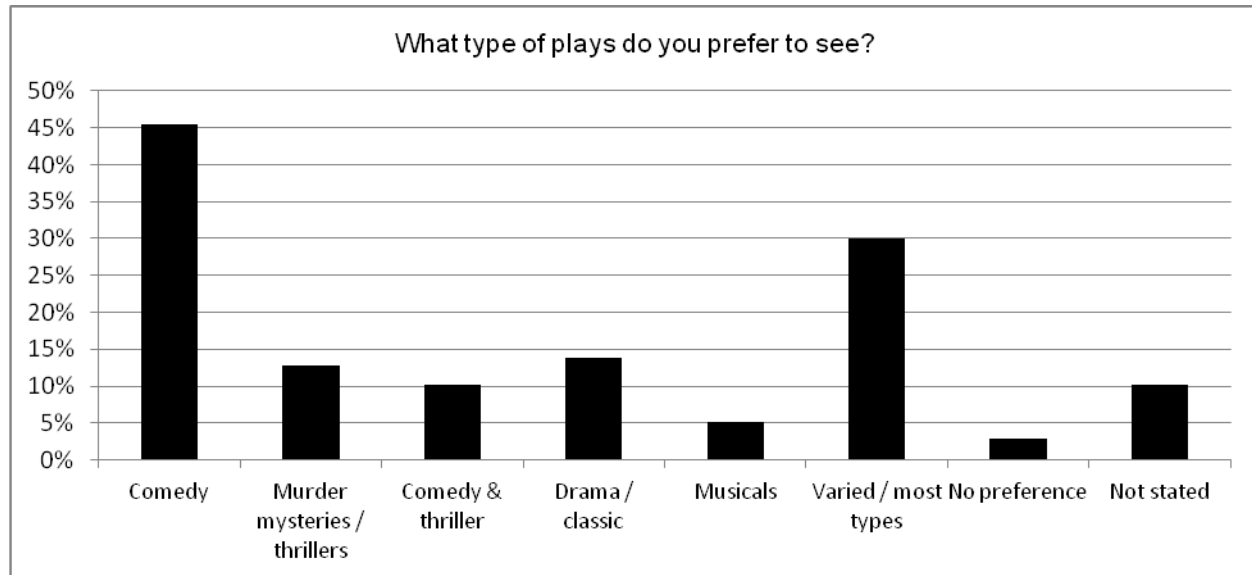


We love the support we have from our regular audiences who are the lifeblood of our theatre. We're also very pleased to welcome people who are coming for the first time. We sincerely hope they enjoy our productions enough to come back again and again, until they, too, turn into our 'regulars'.

About a quarter of both sets of respondents said they had seen five or more productions at other theatres in the year, which is great news for the theatres of Sutton Coldfield and the surrounding area.

What do people prefer?

Nearly half the respondents said they preferred comedies, while about a third said they preferred a variety or most types of play. The graph shows the majority of responses. Some people said they liked more than one type of play (often comedies and thrillers) while some preferences didn't fit into any of these main categories (for example, "good quality").



For many years, we have designed our seasons around 'the Highbury formula' which includes such categories as comedy, thriller, international classic, a play for our times. We believe this gives a good mixture that will keep the interest of both our audience and the Highbury Players.

Two-thirds said they didn't mind whether they came to the first or second week of our main productions. Some people said that when they came depended on other commitments. We would encourage people to come during the first week if they can, because nights in the second week often get booked up and we don't like having to disappoint people when there aren't any seats left.

Nearly two-thirds of people said they were very likely to recommend our productions to a friend or relative. As a small charity, we try not to spend a lot of money on advertising. The value of 'word of mouth' recommendations cannot be overstated and we are delighted with this form of support.

What do people think?

We also invited people to make comments and suggestions about how we might improve. We had a lot of really lovely comments, such as "It is a delight to come to the Highbury", "Very good value and excellent entertainment", and "Talented actors and very friendly staff". The support for the Highbury Players and our Youth Theatre shone through and made us quite emotional!

Comments and suggestions

In this section, we look at some of the more specific comments and suggestions people made and let you know how we are taking them forward.

'Taster' evening

We had a suggestion for a 'taster' evening for new members. At the end of each season, we have an evening at which we announce the programme for the following season and the directors are invited to talk more about the plays. The evening is open to anybody who wants to come along. It provides a chance to meet some of the Highbury Players and maybe have a look round those parts of the theatre that audiences don't usually reach! People who are interested in being involved with a play can also talk to the directors in more detail. The launch of the 2013/14 season will be on 16 June 2013, the day after *Much Ado About Nothing* ends – put the date in your diary now!

Keep the casts varied

Some people encouraged us to "Keep the casts varied". So how do we choose our casts? We try to make the casting process as open as possible. There are two 'readings' for every production and the dates are publicised on Highbury Players' membership cards. We also publish them on our website and on our Facebook page so that people who aren't already Highbury Players are able to find out about them.



From left to right, our Bouncers cast introduces new member Simon Baker and welcomes back on stage Keith Hayes, Richard Ham and Kerry Frater, while our Shakers are new member Theresa Stokes who is joined by Louise Farmer, Jayne Rickard and Laura Chinn.

The first reading is known as the familiarisation reading and anyone who is interested in finding out more about the show (including non-members) is welcome to attend this. The play is read aloud, so everyone can hear the story and start to get to know the parts that are available. The second, casting reading is where people audition for the different parts. They don't need to have come to the first reading.

If the director hasn't been able to cast a part after the casting reading, they are then able to make contact with other people to see if they might like to be in the play. They are usually able to be flexible about things like age and sometimes even gender!

However, we are reliant on people being interested in and available for different parts. Some people love acting and audition to be in every play possible while others may be having a very busy time in their lives and are only rarely able to audition. This includes our younger members. We are always pleased when they are involved with Highbury Players' productions but sometimes they just have too many other commitments.

More activities

Some people asked for "More activities". We have a social committee which organises a programme of events throughout the year. In recent years, we have had wine tasting evenings and poetry readings in the theatre as well as trips to other venues for concerts and plays. Our annual carol service at Emmanuel Church has become an essential part of Christmas.

Our social events are advertised in the foyer, on the notice board by the Box Office. Audience members are also kept informed of them through notices in the programmes and the audience newsletter, which we send out by e mail. If you don't already get the newsletter, please give your name and e mail address to a member of the Front of House staff. They will pass it on to our audience newsletter editor who will include you in the circulation.

We also ran a couple of special events in conjunction with two of our productions this year. We ran a World War II quiz on 14 and 20 March 2013 during *Flare Path*. On 18 April 2013, the audience had the chance to meet the cast of *Entertaining Angels* after the production.

Improving our marketing and advertising

Several people suggested we need to improve our marketing and advertising. We mentioned previously that, as a small charity, we try not to spend a lot of money on advertising. We send out information to the local papers about our forthcoming productions. We try to make these 'press releases' interesting so they publish them as local news stories. We are included in a number of local event 'listings' such as *Live Brum*, that lists events for the city. We are affiliates of *Behind the Arras*, who send a reviewer to each of our productions and then publish their review on their website.

We have also been trying some new approaches in order to make more people aware of the theatre and our productions.

We were supported by some of our members in distributing this year's season guide to the homes of people who live in Boldmere, near the theatre. We have got some posters advertising all the productions for the season that are being displayed on local notice boards. We gave out promotional flyers in Birmingham City Centre, as part of the Arts Fest at the start of September, and have begun doing the same in Sutton Coldfield, just before each production opens. If you have come to the theatre because you found out about us through one of these means, welcome!

We are looking at our website in order to make it easier for people to find out more about our productions. We are looking into enabling people to book tickets online. We have been keeping up a steady stream of information through our *Highbury Theatre Centre* Facebook page. We have been experimenting with some promotional videos for productions on *HighburyPlayers'* You Tube channel. We are also on Twitter as *@highburytc*.

Improving our facilities

We had some comments on improving the theatre facilities. People who have been coming to Highbury for many years will know that the theatre has been through several development programmes and this hasn't stopped. We are, however, very keen to raise the money we need before we start building work. This means that we are doing this in phases.

We opened a new rehearsal space (The Harlequin Suite) and extended our car park at the back of the theatre in 2006. We have also recently made some smaller improvements. We refurbished our Box Office, we have some new seats in the foyer and, thanks to the generosity of Church Street Printers, we have put up new signs on the front of the building, to help draw attention to ourselves.



Our development committee has begun to look at what else we need to do in order to improve both the areas that our audiences use and some of our other 'back stage' areas. But in order to do that, we are having to take a step back and ask ourselves what we want the theatre to be doing in the long term future. We spent some time on 7 April 2013 discussing our future direction and more information will be forthcoming.

We are keen to hear the views of our audiences about how to develop the theatre, so if you've got any views or ideas, please jot them down and pop them in the 'suggestion box' in the foyer. Alternatively, you can e mail our development committee at development@highburytheatre.co.uk

How does Highbury Theatre work?

We had several comments that made us think it might be helpful to explain a bit more clearly how Highbury Theatre and its enthusiastic volunteers operate. So here goes!

The season

We had requests for things like "More productions", "More performances", "More regular Saturday matinees" and "Longer season". Over the years, we have made various changes to how our seasons are organised. We had a period, for example, when we didn't put on any plays in our studio. Our current season has 12 productions in it, including three studio productions and two productions by our Youth Theatre. The main house productions run for two weeks and the studio productions for one week.

We put on Saturday matinees for our Studio productions during the last two seasons but found that fewer people wanted to come to them. We haven't scheduled any in for this season but will keep this under review.

Behind the scenes

In addition to the casts, each production needs the support of a lot of other people. Audiences will be aware of the people who sell the tickets and programmes and serve in the coffee shop and bar. They may be less aware of the small army of volunteers who also work 'behind the scenes' for each production. They build the sets, provide the furniture, costumes and 'properties', design and operate the lights and sound and run the show each night.



Even a studio play like Skylight, with a cast of three, needed four people to be there every night to make sure everything ran smoothly for the actors.

Richard Shields (top left) operated the lights and sound, Rob Brew (top right) stage managed, Sheila Knapman (bottom left) prompted and Alison Cahill (bottom centre) directed, all in support of Martin Walker (top, second from left), Josh Higgs (top, second from right) and Bhupinder Kaur Dhamu (bottom right).

We also have members who do all the things that keep the theatre running, such as ordering stock, paying the bills, maintaining the building, and so on. We also make the theatre available to other companies who want to perform on our stage and provide them with some of the same support.

Much though we love working at the theatre, we all have other commitments and everyone needs a break from time to time. In years where we have fitted more things in, we have begun to struggle to find people to help out, so we have been trying to keep our commitments more manageable.

If you think you might like to join us in putting on productions or running the theatre, please do come down on any Monday evening (7.30 – 9.30) or Wednesday morning (10.00 – 12.00) when there are always people around who will talk with you about any aspect of the theatre and help you decide what you might be interested in.

Membership and pricing

We also had some comments about our membership and pricing arrangements. We are a membership theatre. This has particular implications for things like the Licensing Act 2003 which covers both the performance of plays as well as the sale of alcohol. We recently spent some time rewriting the section of our season guide that explained about membership and ticket prices for this season to try to make our arrangements clearer. We are keeping this under review.

We hope that we have responded to most of the survey comments and suggestions in this article and that you have learned a little bit more about our theatre. We are planning on repeating the survey at the end of this season. We hope you will give us more feedback and we look forward to receiving your views.

The Marketing Committee
April 2013