



THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMFY DEPT. ROAD TEST

Broadway, like New York City, is a place where petty comforts are fought for but rarely won. So when Jujamcyn Theatres, which owns five Broadway houses, recently announced a “revolutionary” measure—the installation of ergonomic seats at the August Wilson, currently home to the musical “Jersey Boys”—the news inspired both relief and skepticism. “Using dual density foams to encourage an anatomically correct posture,” a press release read, “the patented ProBax® cushions reduce back ache and muscle fatigue from sitting.” It was a bit like the Spanish Inquisition, as portrayed by Monty Python, threatening to “fetch the Comfy Chair.”

A few days later, Ian Moore, the C.E.O. of NuBax, the British company that developed ProBax, was standing in Row S. “When you sit down, two million years of postural evolution get thrown right out the window,” he explained. He took out a purple bowling ball and handed it to a visitor. “That is the weight of your head,” he said, noting that, in a standard seat, the pelvis rotates backward, resulting in slumping and muscle strain. “What this technology aims to do is kid your pelvis into thinking it’s still standing up.”

The benefits: less fidgeting and leg-crossing, reduced armrest dependence, and increased blood flow and lung capacity, which lead to better concentration (and less nodding off). The August Wilson is the first North American entertainment venue to use ProBax, and Moore spoke of its effect on the West End thriller “The Woman in Black”: “There are three or four very big pauses in the play, and normally there’s

coughing, and the fidgeting is like a ripple—now it’s totally silent and still.” Jordan Roth, the president of Jujamcyn, who was reclining in Row T, added, “We don’t expect people to say, ‘Oh, my God, what a chair!’ We expect them to say, ‘Oh, my God, what a show!’” Bold claims, but would they hold up? To find out, a study was devised. The guinea pigs: Subject A (thirties, male) and Subject B (fifties, female), both highly distractible. The materials: (1) one index-finger oximeter, which detects the pulse and blood-oxygen level of its wearer; (2) one peak-flow meter, a white plastic device, used mostly by asthmatics to measure respiratory capacity; and (3) two mood rings, to gauge emotional output.



Upon arriving at “Jersey Boys,” Subject B gave an assessment of her seat: “As far as my pelvis goes, I couldn’t be happier. The clearance between me and the chair in front of me is adequate but not exceptional. The color’s nice.” She caressed the red seat: “Mmm, velvety.”

According to the oximeter, Subject A began Act I with a pulse of eighty-one beats per minute and a blood-oxygen level of ninety-eight per cent, while Subject B came in at eighty and ninety-six, respectively. A half hour in, Subject A's pulse rate shot up dramatically when the Frankie Valli character sang "Big Girls Don't Cry," while Subject B danced in her seat, presumably increasing circulation. Blowing into the peak-flow meter (this drew several perplexed stares), Subject A registered a lung capacity of four hundred and fifty litres per minute, while Subject B, a former smoker, ranged from three hundred and twenty to four hundred. The mood rings proved to be unreliable. Subject B's remained dark blue (calm), even during "Sherry," while Subject A's turned green (happy), despite his annoyance with the woman to his right, who kept unwrapping Jolly Ranchers.

At intermission, Subject B noted, "Spine-wise, I feel great. My concentration level is high, except for the fact that Large Marge"—she gestured toward the woman on her left—"keeps spilling over into my seat." The Jolly Rancher sucker, who turned out to be a lovely woman from Galway, said that she was "comfy enough," but added, "We have a theatre at home called the Waterfront, and it has ample leg and elbow room."

As Act II began, there were signs of increased restlessness: coughing, arm-stretching, eye-rubbing. Everyone perked up for "Can't Take My Eyes Off You," during which Subject A's ring turned purple (excited). At the curtain call, Subject B reported, "I feel good, but the armrests are too short." Her ring was lavender, which, she said, "means I want a drink." As a control, Subject A later attended a performance of "Mamma Mia!" at the Winter Garden, which has not installed ProBax seating. (Subject B had a thing that night.) Although his lung capacity remained constant, his pulse dipped as low as sixty-three (during "Take a Chance on Me"). In addition, he experienced increased drowsiness, numbness in the thighs, and frequent doodling in his *Playbill*.

Conclusions: The ProBax seats were found to be significantly more comfortable. However, the experiment was flawed, as no control was available for the relative physiological effects of the Four Seasons versus ABBA.

—*Michael Schulman*
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