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The Democratisation of Judgment and the Role of the Theatre Critic'

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Year paper completed: 2010

Leadership Content Theme/s: Sector Insights, Digital Innovation

AHRC Subject Area/s: Policy Arts Management and Creative Industries, Cultural Geography, Community Art (including Art and Health)

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Chris Stafford 2009/10 Clore Fellow – Research Paper Draft 1

The Democratisation of Judgment and Role of the Theatre Critic Today

... there is something incomplete about a work, written, rehearsed and opened to the theatre-going public until its existence also extends to the reading public. The need for attention is a human appetite almost as basic as the need for food. So is the appetite for judgment. And no members of the human race feel these appetites quite so keenly as performing artists. (Wardle, 1992, P6)

Wardle (1992) examines the role of theatre criticism both past and present and argues that theatre criticism is an intrinsic part of the theatre-making process for both audiences and artists. Although criticism within the arts has existed at least as far back as Aristotle, the genre of theatre criticism did not become firmly established until the eighteenth-century where reviews were frequently published that arguably conformed to a set of 'critical rules'

C. H. Gray pinpoints the Renaissance as the beginning of the development of a dramatic theory and critical rules that would inform the early review writers and beyond. The rules included the concept of the three unities along with taste, decorum and poetic justice, and were the yardstick by which reviewers, for a long period after the Renaissance, would judge productions (Wilkinson, pp 109-110, 2009)

The theatre review has changed over the last few hundred years and it could be argued that a democratised society has shaped and changed the role of the critic and the 'rules' of theatre criticism. However, Gray highlights the relationship of criticism and judgment which many people still adhere to. In this paper I am going to explore what is the role and responsibility of the theatre critic today, what makes 'good' theatre criticism and what is the future of the theatre review. I will do this by specifically focussing on three 'case studies' which engage with more traditional review formats as well as more recent mechanisms such as blogging and social media.

Theatre blogger, practitioner and critic, Andrew Haydon believes that the theatre critic should provide a critique of a performance and not criticise it. He describes theatre criticism as '... a journalistic report on what happened in a particular theatre on a particular night.' (Haydon, 2010). If this is the case, it suggests theatre critics are not only serving contemporary audiences, they are also providing an archived record on a particular production that may be the only lasting account. Although new technology has shaped and advanced the archive of performances through video recordings, You Tube, podcasts and others, it is commonly held that the filmed archive can never adequately capture the perceptions of the contemporary spectator. Today we rely on theatre reviews to inform us of seminal performances of, for example, Brecht, Olivier, Garrick and others. Perhaps this is why producers and artists are uneasy with theatre criticism, however. 'What they say about my

plays doesn't matter, my plays survive the critics, but what they say about my productions matters very much because what they write is all that posterity will know of the subject.' (Brecht in Wardle, 1992, p13).

It could be argued that theatre criticism at its best can guide the public to work that they may not otherwise see and contribute in the early success of a particular production. Susannah Clapp's early review of a scratch performance of *Jerry Springer: The Opera* is noted as playing an important part in the production being taken on by the National Theatre; she brought the work to the attention of the reading public and other critics. Similarly, it could be argued that Kenneth Tynan secured John Osborne's place in theatre history and brought his work to the attention of contemporary audiences by declaring 'I could not love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*.' However, if the impact of the review can contribute to the commercial success of a particular production, unanimously poor reviews can also play a part in failure of work. Trevor Nunn's £4 million stage version of *Gone with the Wind* closed 3 months early receiving unanimously poor reviews by critics who described it, for example, as 'very boring and dull'. The recent west-end stage adaption of *Cool Hand Luke* recently announced it will close 3 months early after receiving a lukewarm critical response with Charles Spencer commenting that "I cannot see any good reason why anyone would want to stump up West End prices to see this second-rate stage version of a show that is readily available on DVD for less than a fiver."

The word 'critic' is derived from the Greek meaning someone who offers reasoned judgement, interpretation or observation and Mandell (2011) suggests that good theatre criticism has three core qualities;

- independent judgment that is rooted in education and experience
- articulate views with clarity and evidence
- taste shared with an intended audience.

It can be argued that the close association of criticism with judgment - as highlighted by Mandell and Gray (2009) - conjures connotations of aesthetic elitism and perhaps supports the image that theatre critics today are 'white, male and stale'. This idea is further supported by Nicholas Hytner's 2009 critique on critics when he pinpoints the demographic of the leading newspaper critics "The first-string critics of all the major daily papers are males, white, over 50 and Oxbridge educated." If the leading critics today are all Oxbridge (which many are) one could argue that this supports Bourdieu's work on judgment/ taste and its relationship between class and education. According to Bourdieu (1989), education promotes middle class values with the education system favouring the middle classes. If one is from a middle/ upper class background certain values and beliefs are inherent and nurtured by that class. He refers to this as 'cultural capital'. Such taste and judgements will be communicated as of higher value. It seems that the majority of theatre critics have extensive 'cultural capital' and will therefore be promoting particular forms of aesthetic taste.

According to Bourdieu, then, taste is linked to education and social origin and

functions as a marker of class.

Bourdieu argues that culture is a way of distinguishing between the positions of the social hierarchy. Those who are born into upper class echelons will acquire dispositions that allow them to appreciate the certain forms of culture (high art for example) and such abilities will help them secure elevated positions in the class hierarchy. Working-class people on the other hand, will acquire from their family contexts and schools they attend cultural dispositions that prepare them for lives at the bottom of the class ladder. The social system thus tends to reproduce itself through culture and schooling. (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998, p1026)

The group who decide what is 'good art' is the group who can interpret and understand particular forms of art - the dominant middle-classes, their taste is encoded and decoded within their class and they therefore have the right lens to appreciate the art, "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is the codes into which it is encoded." (Bourdieu, 1989, p2). It could be argued that theatre critics as 'taste-makers' are indicative of a hierarchical society and perpetuate the idea that theatre is a middle-class industry - a notion which was recently highlighted by Lyn Gardner when she identified a third of regional theatres as led by Oxbridge graduates.

Clearly, for practitioners – and for audience members who may imagine that reviewers' long experience of theatre-going lends their judgments special cultural authority – the question of taste does matter. Surely it is the responsibility of critics to keep their reviews – or of newspapers to keep their reviewers – abreast of changing cultural tastes and trends? Without such awareness – and a willingness to look to the future as well as celebrate the past – the critical commentary on performance appearing in the daily press can only become an increasingly obstructive and anachronistic drag upon new developments in theatre and performance.

Helen (Freshwater, 2009 pp. 35-6)

The recent developments in new technology have arguably had an impact on the role of the theatre critic today. The arrival of the Internet has provided audiences with the opportunity to share views and opinions on performances through blogs and online reviewing sites. Whilst it could be argued that such websites and forums may not offer the expertise and quality of writing that the professional review provides, it could be considered that the digital age has democratised judgment and provided everyone with a platform to express views and opinions. In this paper, I hope to examine the impact that the internet has had on theatre criticism and how this had impacted on the role of the theatre critic today.

Although advances in technology can provide everyone with a platform to share opinions and criticism on performances, a survey in *The Stage* (6 May 2010) indicates that only 3% of people rate Internet blogs as the most trusted source of opinions on

theatre productions. However, the same survey also showed that whilst 89% of people believe that theatre critics still play a valuable role in theatre, 46% feel that the role they play is less important than it was 10 years ago. A recent survey of audiences attending performances at Bristol Old Vic (BOV) and Shakespeare's Globe provides evidence to support some of the findings outlined in *The Stage*. The survey of audiences (*Treasure Island* at BOV, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *God of Soho* at the Globe) revealed that over 1/3 had read a review prior to booking tickets and of those that read reviews, 77% booking for *Treasure Island* and 28% booking for *Much Ado About Nothing*, stated that the reviews influenced their decision to book. Although there is a big difference in the BOV audience and *Much Ado About Nothing* audience in terms of how reviews may have informed booking choices, it could be argued that subconsciously reviews did still influence the audience booking for *Much Ado About Nothing*; *Much Ado About Nothing* rated an average of 3.5 stars in all press and is noted as one of the Globe's critical successes (there were no poor reviews published) and so the audience is not faced with split critical opinion- they booked to see production that rated a minimum of 3 stars and a critical consensus that the play was 'good'. However, *God of Soho* did split critical opinion in the press- the play scored an average 2 star rating with 1 star reviews in *The Times*, *Observer* and *Daily Mail* through to 4 stars in *Time Out*. The audience survey revealed that of the 35% of audiences that had read a review before booking, 66% said that the review did inform their decision to book. However, of the reviews that audiences read in advance, over 84% had read *Time Out* or *The Guardian* which recorded the two most positive reviews (4 star and 3 star respectively) indicating that the two most positive reviews had influenced audience attendance. *God of Soho* is a new play and Henry Hitchens (2011) believes that reviews play a more important role in the success of new writing as the critic is not only charged with writing a review on a particular production but also needs to introduce the key themes/ plot to the reader. However, in the case of *God of Soho*, there was not a noticeable difference in the number of people that had read a review before booking and it is questionable if there was a larger number reading reviews if it would have made any difference to bookings. "A critic can make a show, particularly a small show, I don't think a critic can destroy a show, only critical uniformity can destroy a show." (Hitchens, 2011). The survey supports Hitchens's ideas and found that 59% of audiences would still book for something even if they know it has been reviewed badly.

Although Internet blogs are still at a stage of infancy in terms of trust and audience following, arguably technology and the democratisation of judgment is having some impact on the relevance of theatre critics today- audience trust is still with the critics but the window of opinion is open to everyone and not just the small group of 'tastemakers'. Mandell (2010) believes that there are over 300,000 arts related bloggers and so it could be considered that it will take time for users/ audiences to find bloggers that they trust with opinions that will guide and inform choices. In ten years time one could speculate that there will be a large increase in the followers of a small group of bloggers. However, it could also be argued that 46% of people feel that theatre critics play a less valuable role is not because of the Internet, but is due to less visibility of theatre criticism in the press. In recent years, especially in the USA

where many publications have replaced in-house theatre critics with freelance writers, the physical space given to theatre criticism in print has been drastically reduced which could suggest less value being placed on the voice of the 'expert'.

Because most British theatre criticism is published in newspapers, the form itself exists at the whim of newspaper proprietors. The vast majority of newspaper proprietors are right-wing multi-millionaires. As such, it's a miracle that theatre criticism even continues to exist at all. (Haydon, 2011)

Henry Hitchens believes that the reduction in space allocated to theatre criticism in the press is largely due to a decline in newspaper readership and this in turn has had an impact on the employment of specialist arts journalists. "It's not that there are extra critics who are bloggers, it's that newspapers have become less important because fewer people read them. Most newspapers over the last 5 years have lost 20-30% of their readership and are less influential." (Hitchens, 2011). It could be argued that the loss/ reduction of specialist journalists in print and the rise of blogging signifies a loss of expertise and devalues the role of the theatre critic. The respect for the professional critic and "their judgment (is) deemed superfluous to requirements in the age of the net" (Raynor, 2008)

It is said that the demotion of experts is democratising, empowering the ordinary man in the street; we all get a chance to say our bit, argue our corner and state our case. But this misses the crucial role of criticism and the opportunities it opens up to us... Critical judgment is important, not just for the success or failure of the work being assessed, but also for shaping culture. Artistic and cultural movements have been informed by critical writing. (Jenkins, 2009)

Whilst the democratisation of judgment challenges the status quo and provides everyone with a voice, it could be argued that this development and shift in the voice of opinion may ultimately threaten the growth and development of theatre practice. Jenkins discusses that there is a need for specialist theatre critics and suggests that not everyone can take on the role of the critic- expertise and skill is developed and nurtured over a period of time and professional criticism is an essential part of the theatre ecology. "We critics, reviewers, consumer reporters- call us what you will- are the dung beetles of culture. We consume excrement, enriching the soil and protecting the livestock from bacterial infection in the process. We are intrinsic to the theatre ecology." (Cotes, 2010)

Theatre critics are not only ambassadors for theatre, but it could be argued that good criticism requires knowledge of the skills and disciplines needed in the creation of theatre and the processes by which artists create work. Although some bloggers will have knowledge and expertise, the professional critic provides readers with a benchmark of knowledge and expertise. Matt Trueman (2011) believes that good

criticism is not only about knowledge but about being interesting to the reader and he considers there to be seven types of theatre critic;

- Policeman- moralist figure
- Publicist- trying to get people into the theatre
- Self-publicist- they become the story
- Soothsayer- can spot a successful venture
- Gossip- focused more on 'tittle tattle' than content
- Trainspotter- references different productions of the same play
- Angel of Death- seeks to shock

Trueman believes that a good critic can bring all of these types together for the right production. Clearly some critics may only take on one or two of these roles, but ultimately it is the reader that decides on the critics that they trust- some readers may feel more excited by the fire and passion of the 'Angel of Death' as opposed to the nostalgia and yesteryear in the reviews of the Soothsayer. Hitchens (2011) suggests that some readers may still go and see something if a particular critic gives it a bad review as they know that the opinion of a specific critic is usually the opposite of their own. Hitchens believes that good criticism is a combination of three different attributes;

- Chronicler- what happened in the theatre on a particular night.
- Tipster- is it value for money? Is it worth seeing?
- Advocate- an advocate for theatre.

David Phipps-Davis (2011) also adds that criticism comes down to personal opinion "When I am criticising, it's my opinion. I am not sure all critics are aware of that and sometimes (they) think (that) they are speaking on behalf of society." (Phipps-Davis, 2011). It could be argued that the notion of the ambassador and advocate lends itself to the idea that some critics allow their role goes beyond the review. Quentin Letts' (2011) recently wrote an article in the Daily Mail titled: "The RSC's latest 'outrageous' play is nothing but a shocking waste of your money." (Letts, 2011). Letts questions the use of public subsidy on productions like Marat/Sade and other productions that do not appeal to him and questions the use of public subsidy to the point that "...cash could be used to reduce the national deficit, or to support the needy, or to find cash-starved manufacturers." (Letts, 2011). It could be argued that Letts has blurred the boundaries of theatre criticism and has taken on the role of ambassador/ advocate to the extreme. However, it could also be argued that Letts is simply expressing a view on the use of subsidy in the arts and, based on his 'expert' opinion, how he believes money could be better spent.

Lyn Gardner (2011) discusses how the reduced word-count/ physical space has an impact on her work and she believes that it is difficult for critics to be truly descriptive in as little as 320 words. "Reviewers write to length knowing that if they overwrite, it is their opinions that will be out..." (Wardle p5). Georgina Brown of *The Mail on Sunday* was unable to review *Puppetry of the Penis* and the *Vagina Monologues* as the Editors did not want language in print that may offend readers. The everyday blogger does not have to work with the restrictions that are placed on the theatre critic; s/he has the critical freedom to review anything free of any

allegiance to specific publications, the politics that they are associated with. Matt Trueman (2011) who is both professional critic and blogger defines blogging as a personal platform "Writing in the dusty corner of the Internet, I can write how I like, what I like, for as long as I like, from whatever angle. Essentially I am writing for me." However, the blogger does not have the following, readership or established authority of many of the mainstream professional critics and it could be argued that the only real use of blogging is to review the shows that critics would not normally see. Hitchens (2011) believes that although blogging is an important part of the critical ecosystem, bloggers need to be distinctive and not simply repeat what newspapers are already doing. Although the democratisation of judgment challenges the status quo and the notions of judgment/ taste being decided from 'on high', it could be argued that the 'bad' might drive out the 'good' and the future leads to the extinction of the professional critic.

...we'll turn to the blogosphere, or those that we follow on Twitter and other social networking sites, to find a consensus. But there will be no consensus, just a buzz of artists promoting shows, audiences offering their opinion, badly written amateur reviews, friends promoting friends, and maybe- just maybe- a few informed theatergoing bloggers whom we trust. (Cote, 2011)

Although new technology has shaped and changed the direction of arts marketing, as discussed audiences are still turning to the press (in print and online) for opinions on theatre productions- of those surveyed at the Globe and BOV only 4.5% said that they had read a blog in advance of booking, the rest who had read reviews had gone to professional theatre criticism in the press or online. However, a survey of audiences at the 2011 Edinburgh Festival found that of the 55% of people that had read reviews before booking, 36% of them had read blogs and 69% were influenced by Twitter feeds from theatre companies and critics. A recent digital arts survey by the Arts Council England found that $\frac{1}{2}$ of audiences use social networking sites and of those $\frac{1}{4}$ use them to share information on cultural events with friends. However the survey also found that in general audiences want credible assistance from trusted cultural brands to help them decide what experiences to look into. It could be argued that critics and publications are the 'brands' that audiences trust and that this trust is built up over a period of time and it would take a while for some blogs to reach the point of credibility that professional criticism has.

The truth is there are very few amateurs who are better than professionals. If you are really good at it you figure out some way to get paid for it. At the risk of sounding elitist everyone has an opinion, but not everyone has an informed opinion. (Means, 2010)

Means (2010) suggests that the skilled blogger will manage to make a profession out of criticism and it could be argued that when this happens they will automatically make a shift to becoming a professional critic.

Although social media can provide a platform for theatres to communicate with audiences and for friends to share their opinions on cultural experiences, can a Facebook update or a 140 character Tweet provide an insightful critique? “Facebook, Twitter and blogs are increasingly the means by which ticket sales are driven rather than reviews or traditional forms of advertising.” (Lyn Gardner, 20 April 2010). According to a survey by the Society of London Theatres, 65% of audiences said that social media influenced if they went to the theatre and what productions they went to see. Although it could be argued that social media should be considered a form of word-of mouth as opposed to criticism, it is impossible to ignore the impact that it has in creating a current of feelings about particular shows. Facebook and Twitter updates provide a quick and brief dialogue with audiences, and whereas only a few years ago readers/ audiences would need to wait at least 8 hours to get a sense of critical opinion after opening night, today Lyn Gardner will often Tweet about something that she has just seen and share her thoughts with almost 12,000 followers. “Journalists of my generation have to adapt. And we have to accept that the printed word no longer has aristocratic supremacy.” (Billington in Raynor 2009). Theatre criticism is no longer a one-way system- today many theatre critics are making use of blogs and social media to communicate with audiences and on many online reviews there is a ‘comments’ section that provides a readers with the opportunity to respond to criticism.