

The Critic at Harvard

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A symposium on the proper role, stance, and credentials of the reviewers who comment on undergraduate theatre, music, and writing.

AWAY FROM FLIPPANCY

By David S. Cole

Let me begin with a pet peeve and see if I can work my way toward fair-mindedness.

What I like least about undergraduate theatre reviews is the frequency of epigrammatic evaluations. It's not likely that one turn-of-phrase is going to come out both witty *and* accurate, and usually a student reviewer fulfills his journalistic obligation to amuse at the expense of his critical obligation to stay on the point.

There's a well-known quip on someone's performance of Lear: "He played the king as if he expected somebody else to play the ace." That's the sort of thing undergraduate reviewers do so well - snap judgments phrased so as to sound like insights. All right, it's delicious; but does it give any sense at all of what the performance was like?

I think that's what a reviewer has to do: give his readers *the feel* of the performance. That's not all he has to do, but he'd better start there. Whatever insights, whatever evaluations he may have to offer, let him do the offering in language saturated with the experience of the performance.

But if he is going to have a distinct experience of this or that production of a play, he must first have a distinct experience of the play itself, the *play as text*, to refer back to. Production of a play means externalization of a text, and all the aspects of production which a critic takes it upon himself to discuss are visual or aural renderings of the text's substance and structure.

Unless the critic has a clear conception of what's being externalized, how can he measure the force and subtlety of any particular externalization? A theatre

critic has got to study his text - and I mean study, I don't mean a lick-and-a-promise between Huntley-Brinkly and 8:30.

And I mean a particular kind of study: a *director's* study. Unless a critic knows the techniques of externalizing a text, unless he understands how shape, movement, color and light are put to expressive use in the theatre, he will not make relevant criticisms. He will inform us that the blocking was "clumsy" or the set "stunning," mistaking expressive devices for the object of dramatic representation.

Most student reviewers are wanting in a knowledge of theatre techniques. The leading student actors and directors and designers have this knowledge, or at least have more of it than those who undertake to evaluate their efforts, and when they shrug off an incompetent review, there is more to their rejection than sour grapes.

There is justice in their complaint that they have not been equitably judged, because equitable judgment means judgment by one's peers. It is no argument that the reviewer's ignorance of theatrical techniques makes him a fit representative of the general public: is the public to be informed and educated by representatives of its own incapacity?

I am afraid that the vicious severity of many undergraduate reviewers is an effort to conceal ignorance behind a smoke-screen of "high standards". Nothing wrong with high standards, Lord knows; but there is no reason why an appreciation of the very best - which we are never going to get in the amateur theatre - should keep us from enjoying the very good - which we get surprisingly often.

Consummate performances are not the only ones that give pleasure, though they are perhaps the only ones that give consummate pleasure.

The student critic is doing Harvard

theatre no service who depreciates local performances of Moliere or Mozart or Brecht by invidious comparisons with the TNP, La Scala, and the Berliner Ensemble. What we can get, and what we therefore have a right to expect, is competence, style and imaginative fidelity to the playwright's intentions. Our critics have got to learn to recognize these excellences when they see them, and to account for the deficiencies when they don't. That means acquiring knowledge of theatre practice. And the way you acquire that is, you work in the theatre. A word to the wise.

(DAVID S. COLE '63 has had four of his plays produced at Harvard, including *How I Worked It With the Bush*, the first student-written play at the Loeb Drama Center. In 1961 he won the Harvard Drama Club-Advocate Prize for playwriting with *En Croisade*. He has acted for the Harvard Summer School Players.)

A RESPECTFUL MEMO TO DRAMA REVIEWERS

By Samuel Abbott

Let's hear no more talk of professionalism versus amateurism. The distinction may be valid between the Theatre Guild and the Woonsocket Community Players, but even there it is one of degree. For the academic theatre it is one of kind. Plays may be produced at Harvard that could never find backing for a commercial production. All deal of experimentation and simplification is possible. The mechanism is not so unwieldy, the economics not so pressing.

The strength of Broadway always

(Continued on next page)