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THE DEATH (AND LIFE) OF  
AMERICAN THEATER CRITICISM

*Advice to the Young Critic*

*A Lecture to Students at Barnard College and New York University, Fall 2002*

Theater criticism is an art (some might call it a vice) I have practiced for twenty-two years. University lectures on theater criticism aren't common, in my experience, partly because the subject falls into the crevices between edgily linked disciplines—literary studies and theater practice, scholarship and journalism, art and entertainment. There are also more practical reasons. Theater programs are partial to visits by working playwrights, actors, directors, and designers, which makes sense as they are practitioners of flourishing professions. They can be displayed as evidence of the golden future awaiting the best theater graduates. In the same circumstances I have to be more circumspect; I can describe successes to you, but if I'm not to distort the truth, I must also report my discomfort that my art is in danger of extinction.

Please don't worry, I'm not planning to whine. I'm aware that the extreme circumstances as I see them sometimes do have a fertilizing effect, just as dung dropped in a trampled pasture occasionally nurtures tufts of new green grass. I address myself today especially to the tougher tufts among you, to offer the benefit of whatever survivalist wisdom I might have. The fact is, though, there is no way to describe the promise, the opportunity, the necessity, or the dignity of the critical act at the current moment without first explaining, and maybe even attempting to alarm you about, the forces arrayed against it.

I consider myself fortunate. I've had real, sometimes enviable opportunities. After several unhappy years as a pre-med, I began writing theater criticism, with no competition, in my college newspaper, the *Wesleyan Argus*—right after seeing Walter Asmus's astonishing production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which changed my life more than I knew then because it planted the seed of

my first book. Later, after graduation, I reviewed for the local newspaper in my college town, the *Middletown Press*, also a formative experience. At the time—1981—I considered myself a playwright, and I imagined that writing reviews might help me figure out what was wrong with my plays.

What I discovered instead was a fascination with criticism itself; the way my mind worked was better suited to the art of criticism than to playwriting. I don't mind admitting that what most spurred me to begin with, like many others, was the excitement of having my twenty-one-year-old opinion appreciated at long last by a public other than my mother. The editor of the *Middletown Press* soon disabused me on this point. After reading one pan I wrote of a production at the Long Wharf Theatre, he called me into his office to complain, without an iota of irony or hesitation, that my judgment had differed too much from that of the *New York Times*. "It's just . . . it's just too DIFFERENT," he told me, "your review, it's just too different from what THEY said, and I'm uncomfortable with that."

From the *Middletown Press* I went on to write for many other publications, including, for about ten years, the *Village Voice*. But my luckiest (albeit tainted) chance came much later, in 1997, when I fell into what felt like a time warp. After a decade of college teaching, during which I devoted less and less energy to journalism and more and more to books and longer articles and essays about theater, I became the main theater critic for *New York Press*—a free weekly rag-if-there-ever-was-one that sees itself as the *Voice's* chief competition. There, for four theater seasons, I enjoyed working conditions that were to my knowledge unique in the United States: complete freedom to see and say what I wanted, practically zero space pressure (my column was 1,200 to 1,600 words and could run longer if I wanted), and the chance to appear in print about forty times a year while most of the productions I considered were still running.

Despite the fact that it was for only four years, I lasted longer at *New York Press* than any of its previous theater writers, conceiving my columns not merely as reviews but as essays of general interest grounded on current theater events. As to my longevity, I know that it was partly due to keeping out of the right-wing editors' way, never attempting to locate myself within the paper's internal politics or to respond to the provocations of the other columnists (a few of whom I did admire). In any case, I knew I was breathing air inside a Kennedy-era soap bubble, conjured on a whim by hard-boiled Bushies vaguely curious about its potential novelty in the information era. The inevitable prick came in the spring of 2001, when my editor tersely explained that "the theater is boring" and no longer merited space in the paper. I took this with all the sincerity it deserved. Six months after my departure, another critic, a personal friend of the editor-in-chief and CEO, began writing occasional theater reviews in *New York Press*, and today, more than a year later, nearly 100 of my columns are still available on the paper's Web site.

I hope it is obvious that my experience at *New York Press* was an anomaly. One

measure of the straits to which American theater criticism has come is the likelihood that few among you have read much of it. I know this is true of most Hunter College students, and I assume it's also the case with any group of undergraduates aged eighteen to twenty-five. Of course I know you have seen theater reviews, but the question is whether they are really criticism. "Criticism" is an honorific term. If I were in charge, it would refer only to serious criticism, meaning informed and objective commentary by writers with enough space to describe their subject vividly, set their opinions in illuminating context, and traffic a bit in ideas. It needn't and shouldn't be obscure, but serious criticism teaches while it entertains and offers advice about what to do on the weekend. It steers its readers toward thoughts, insights, and associations they hadn't considered before, and is therefore unafraid to be frequently unfashionable.

This sort of criticism was once common in America—in small and large independent journals such as *Dissent*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, the *Saturday Review*, the *Nation*, *Theater Arts*, *Harper's*, and *Vanity Fair* but also, for brief periods, in mass-market forums such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*. No American theater critic ever had the intellectual cachet of, say, the early twentieth-century German critics Alfred Kerr and Herbert Jhering—including George Jean Nathan, who railed against the vacuousness of Broadway in the *Smart Set* (the monthly magazine he cofounded with H. L. Mencken) from 1908 on, or Stark Young, who wrote for the *New Republic* and, for less than a year in 1924 and 1925, the *New York Times*. During that prewar period, American newspaper editors still generally assumed that theater criticism didn't require any special qualifications; reporters were summarily shifted from obituaries or the police blotter to the "drama beat" as needed.

There was a moment during the surge of upward mobility after the Second World War, however, when the American middle class held a handful of serious critics in high esteem. From 1952 to 1956 Eric Bentley, the country's preeminent drama scholar, was the theater critic of the *New Republic*, and from 1961 and 1964 Richard Gilman reviewed regularly for *Commonweal* before moving to *Newsweek*. In 1963, PBS invited the eminent film critic of the *New Republic*, Stanley Kauffmann, to review plays on television. And later in the 1960s—far-fetched as this may seem today—the *New York Times* had something of a sustained epiphany. Within a short period, it hired the short-story writer and future *New Yorker* staffer Renata Adler as film critic, the uncompromisingly leftist, thirty-year-old John Leonard as editor of the book review, and, for eight months in 1966, Stanley Kauffmann as theater critic.

The film scholar Robert Sklar has suggested that this short-lived interest in *Times* critics with sophisticated taste and strong, original visions was partly fed by the confusion of Hollywood studio executives during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Faced with an industry-wide financial crisis, the studio execs became temporarily open-minded and eager to hear from anyone, even intellectuals, who might help them interpret the new age and define what the public wanted. Kauffmann—in a 1967 essay

called “Drama on the Times,” which I think is still the most important piece written about theater criticism in America—referred to his *Times* appointment as “a frontier operation.” The paper’s managers, he wrote, were “dissatisfied with . . . the old-line newspaper reviewing, couched in glib journalese and buoyed on hollow, dubiously knowledgeable generalities”; they responded to “the social pressure of the cultural explosion” by making a risky decision (soon regretted) “to give power to what previously had been tolerated only when impotent: serious theater criticism.”

Needless to say, no such historical moment is likely to come again soon. September 11 notwithstanding, we live today in an age of astonishing social complacency in which middle-class identity is tightly interlaced with a pseudorebellious pop culture, and pop culture is disseminated by mass media largely dedicated to discouraging real thinking. There was a short interval of, say, three months, in the fall of 2001 when it did seem as though reality had trumped fabrication in the American psyche, but with the war in Afghanistan so far away (a televised experience for most of us) and the anthrax scare out of the headlines, that moment of sobriety (Bill Moyers called it “a teachable moment”) quickly passed. The thrum of American media culture, which provides the crucial illusions of safety and normality, is contingent on a leveling of values, and hence a devaluing of expertise. This is why the sentiment “hey, everyone’s a critic” is so commonplace in our post-your-own-Web site time. No Hollywood executive today would think of consulting a serious critic on any issue, and the same is true of Broadway producers. Why should they, when, to a shocking extent, they can now control the critical voices people hear?

Ours is the era of the “blurb whore,” the pseudoreviewer bribed with perks to say flattering things that can be quoted in ads. This movie-world creature is admittedly rare in the humbler environs of the theater, but its cynical spirit pervades the theater field as well. The corruption of the annual theater awards systems, the shameless journalistic fawning over productions with large budgets, the cozy relationships between high-profile critics and stars: opinions are all clearly for sale, so who can care deeply about anyone’s thoughts? “Whatever,” “Get over it,” “Not even”—all these generational catchphrases capture the essence of the leveling effect, which, curiously enough, was already apparent to Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1940s. “The cult of celebrities,” they wrote, “has a built-in social mechanism to level down everyone who stands out in any way. The stars are simply a pattern round which the world-embracing garment is cut—a pattern to be followed by the shears of legal and economic justice with which the last projecting ends of thread are cut away.”

In 1999, New York’s mayor, Rudy Giuliani—a pair of “shears” *par excellence*—italicized just how broad-based this anticritical ethos had grown when he attacked the Brooklyn Museum for an art show he didn’t like (and never saw). Giuliani never did close down that show (called “Sensation”) or the museum, as he threatened, but his victory was nevertheless consummate. Why? Because nearly every public commentator,

across the political spectrum, accepted his premise that anyone's opinion of complex artworks, no matter how uninformed, deserves wide attention as long as he claims to be offended.

If you were born in the 1970s or later, then, you may like provocative and demanding theater and even like thinking about it, but you are at a big disadvantage. You have no firsthand experience of an American cultural environment in which the critical enterprise seems to have much clout. Most of the independent weeklies and monthlies that once printed substantial theater essays are gone—outflanked, outcooled, outabbreviated, and undersold by the blitzkrieg of slick, conglomerate-owned rags deliberately designed to blur the distinction between objective commentary and advertising. Most of what passes as criticism today is camouflaged PR and celebrity-worship, snappy consumer reports shoved into tiny spaces lest they seem too “intellectual,” and impromptu opinion-mongering by “personal journalists” more interested in themselves than their subjects. We do have a handful of real critics: Michael Feingold in the *Village Voice* and Robert Brustein in the *New Republic*, both of whom have been at their posts for over thirty years; John Heilpern in the *New York Observer*; on occasion John Lahr (who lives in England); and Fintan O'Toole (the Irish former critic of the *Daily News*, who had his fill of tabloid America and moved back to Ireland). More names could be added. I don't mean to slight anyone by omission.

The point is, though, that no matter what names I added, this would be a small, embattled, and aging group. Most of America's best theater writers long ago gave up begging for space from editors indifferent to theater and went off to write books and articles for quarterlies. To be sure, some of these quarterlies are excellent. Where would seriously aspiring young theater writers turn for sustenance and encouragement today and where would innovative practitioners turn for meditative feedback if not to *Theater*, *Theatre Journal*, and *TheatreForum*? There is no mitigating the fact, however, that these publications appear as much as a year after the productions discussed in them have closed. They are no substitute for forums in which inspired and intelligent writers can connect audiences with new theater art that can still be seen.

Any fair discussion of this situation must also touch on the diminished stature of the theater in American society compared to a generation ago. Obviously, theater today is for the most part no longer a mass form but rather a beloved art for a dedicated minority public. Knowledge of the latest hot plays, playwrights, stage actors, and directors is not the passport to social advancement that it once was. I, for one, find it puzzling that the editors of today's general-interest magazines typically consider, say, hip young art stars to be hotter topics than any smart young playwright or director. The work of a newly “discovered” playwright like Rebecca Gilman or Kenneth Lonergan is seen by thousands more people than the first few gallery shows of a new art star, so I can only imagine that the bias comes from the fact that art is amenable to the quick, free glance whereas theater is expensive and demands that people really attend.

Maybe theater in the media age is an art for a certain time of life, or a certain time of mind, when people can listen. Whatever the reasons, though, editors today regard theater as a specialized interest, and over time the space devoted to it in large-circulation magazines has been slashed almost to nothing. Even in our few surviving intellectual weeklies and monthlies, theater coverage has become for the most part brief, rare, and tuned to predetermined editorial keys, a standing reminder of how little the editors know or care about the art.

I will come back to this point because I think that theater writers, some good ones included, share responsibility for burdening theater with the quaint aura of a marginal cottage industry. Not that there isn't a case to be made. I am an incurable theater-lover, but my own experience of playgoing fifteen nights a month for four years in a row confirmed my longstanding hunch that 95 percent of what is produced in New York (and the selection is massive; I was invited to about ten openings a week) deserves the obscurity in which it wallows, or else enjoys a notoriety it hasn't earned. The other side of this observation, however, is that the remaining 5 percent—a remarkably large portion when you think about the sweeping editorial prejudice against theater—is extraordinarily vigorous and worthwhile. Some of it is as cutting edge as any art in the Whitney Biennial. What's missing are voices contextualizing it that way for the general public, rather than emptily exaggerating its appeal or trivializing it as snappy cocktail-party chat.

Which theater critics with a large circulation do you know of who regularly pay substantial attention to anything beyond routine questions of popularity, topicality, and trendiness? Which ones can you point to who consider it a duty to bone up on the production histories of classical plays before reviewing them, or who habitually connect new theater work with interesting new books in the theater field, or outside it, or with trends and movements in other arts? For theatrical innovators in America—and I'm thinking of people like Bill Talen, W. David Hancock, Rinde Eckert, Dare Clubb, or the numerous creative offspring of Richard Foreman—critical pay dirt today consists of a single, forcibly abbreviated article in the *Voice*. Innovative foreign artists are even worse off, since they can't even count on open-minded responses, much less knowledgeable ones—I'm thinking particularly of the recent receptions of the Belgian director Ivo van Hove and the Spanish director Calixto Bieito.

Key institutional and political questions of our time have all but no place in our mainstream criticism: for instance, the effect of grant-writing and art foundation policies on artistic choice; the representation of artists as brands; or the urgent subject of this year's TCG Conference, "The Role of Theater in a Digital Culture." I was pleasantly stunned in May 2002 to see that the usually fluffy Tony Award edition of the *Times Arts and Leisure* section ran a front-page article by Peter Marks, a critic turned feature writer, about the corporatization of Broadway. This article was kinder to producers than I would have been, but Marks deserves credit for the first substantial dis-

cussion of a subject at least eight years old in the paper of record. He touched, at least briefly, on corporate Broadway as a reflection of the institutionalization of the American imagination, as a disastrous planning choice for New York City, and as a withering force within the American theater in general. The question is whether the paper's regular critics will now run with his ball and keep these issues meaningfully before the public. If not, those issues will drop into the great American memory hole like everything else that quarrels with the serene assumptions of consumer culture.

Just one more dispiriting point—an important one—before I shift gears. Yet another impediment to good theater criticism today is that criticism in general, because it involves the supposedly old-fashioned practice of value judgment, has been gradually de-emphasized, if not repudiated, in universities. Value judgment was inimical to the new ethos of cultural theory that began to dominate humanities curricula in the 1970s, with flag bearers such as Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, and Michel Foucault, and one result was a generalized hauteur that snubbed value judgment as the vulgar province of journalism. More to the point, though, the knowledge of theater history and dramatic literature that one needs to be a good critic has been getting harder and harder to attain in American universities. Historical knowledge is of course crucial to the critic, much more so than to fiction writers such as playwrights, since the critic is obliged to situate art, to identify contexts, to make sense of what it isn't up to the playwright to explain.

Time was, no critics acquired this knowledge at universities I'm aware of, but for the past four decades or so, since the proliferation of theater departments, they have been the presumed source. However, given the changes in graduate curricula I've witnessed, and the frustrations of numerous faculty searches I've participated in and learned of, I've grown very worried about the source running dry. In many graduate programs, the teaching of theater history—a unique discipline dedicated to understanding the intricacies of theater language as distinct from all other languages—is being replaced by historiography, and seminars and dissertations focusing on individual artists are being actively discouraged in favor of groupings of artists and theorists with a political spin inevitably born of trendiness. Faced with a dauntingly competitive academic job market, more and more theater graduate students nationally have been gravitating to densely theoretical and thinly interdisciplinary specializations that they think (usually mistakenly) will make them employable, and this has left them with an unforgivably sketchy grounding in the very art that was supposed to be their basic discipline.

Let me emphasize that I'm not defending any established disciplinary boundaries for their own sakes. I'm rather pointing out that the art of theater is still plainly flourishing, yet major wings of the academy, due to their own anxieties about self-preservation, are behaving as though it has died. I'm also saying that penetrating and inspired criticism that demonstrates how to read the language of theater well, in all its complexity, is and has always been its own justification—from George Henry Lewes's

epoch-encompassing reports of Kean, Rachel, and Macready; to Bernard Shaw's dauntless assaults on the popular well-made play; to Herbert Jhering's passionate and nuanced defenses of the prickly young Bertolt Brecht; to Kenneth Tynan's famously acrimonious debate with Eugène Ionesco, which goaded that playwright into making some of his clearest and most memorable statements.

I suspect many of you may feel helpless to change this situation, but there I think you are wrong. You have enormous power over problems of this kind if they bother you enough. For one thing, you are the customers in a multi-billion-dollar educational industry that literally cannot afford to ignore you. Ask loudly enough for anything curricular in a liberal arts environment, and I guarantee you it will appear (and "loudly" is the key word here, not "ask"). For another thing, you are tomorrow's graduate students. Your oedipal rage at the vacuums left by your predecessors will define the future—and let no one fool you with false politesse; intellectual history is as propelled by rage as any fine art.

Oscar Wilde once wrote that "without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all worthy of the name." He also said that "the influence of the critic will be the mere fact of his own existence," and added that "there was never a time when Criticism was more needed than it is now." These statements were made 112 years ago, yet they are, if anything, more true today than then. In a rare despondent moment in 1994, the dance critic of the *New Yorker*, Arlene Croce, wrote that she couldn't "remember a time when the critic [had] seemed more expendable than now." Her despondency was a challenge, though; provoked by what she saw as the unreviewability of "victim art" such as Bill T. Jones's dance-theater work on AIDS, "Still/Here," she cried "foul" in the hope that an angry public might rise to play referee. There really never was a time when good criticism was more needed than it is now, if only because mass culture has now put critical thinking itself at risk.

My dream as a teacher is that my students will all at least become discerning and demanding readers of criticism. And as for those few of you who like to write—you tufts—well, yes, you ought to consider becoming critics yourselves. Not as a public service (certainly a recipe for bad writing) but out of loyalty to yourselves. Oddly enough, as Kauffmann once wrote, criticism is a talent—just like acting, directing, designing, and playwriting. It may sound unfashionable in this era of exploded universal assumptions, but some people are actually more perceptive watchers of plays than others. They see more in theater works than others do, and their creative fulfillment is in communicating their insights persuasively to others. To paraphrase Bernard Shaw—a first-rate drama critic during the early years of his playwright career—either one is a critic or one isn't, and if one is, suppressing it is futile, and squelching it beneath trendy, self-denigrating notions about the equivalency of all opinions is perverse.

I'm aware that all advice is unwise. Nevertheless, here are my promised words of practical advice, offered with all the recklessness of love.

## I. CREATE YOUR OWN REALITY.

Our culture holds only one value more dear than money and youth: self-invention. Don't waste time waiting for any established critic to drop dead so you can slip into the vacancy. Chances are, there will never be a vacancy because the publication will bury the theater column with the critic. Or else it will hire the editor's brother-in-law from Topeka. Very few editors today can make distinctions between good and bad theater criticism; they need you to stick their noses in the plate. *New York Press* didn't have a theater writer when I approached them, and I didn't know until much later that they'd ever had one. At the *Voice*, I was told for years that the paper didn't need a second lead critic, but by continually proposing pieces on interesting and important theater events outside New York, I carved out a place for myself there anyway. This fall, I'm delighted to announce, my newest project, *The Hunter On-Line Theater Review* ([www.hotreview.org](http://www.hotreview.org)), will begin publication. This will be an on-line forum for reviews, essays, and editorials by new and established writers whose work deserves to be called criticism. So if you're good and committed but at a loss where to begin, come and write for me.

## 2. CONVEY WHY THE THEATER IS IMPORTANT.

Since the standard assumption today is that it isn't, everyone who disagrees has a shining chance to surprise people. Bear in mind, however, that most readers don't care nearly as much as you do, to begin with, about the difference between, say, the "liveness" of TV and the "liveness" of theater. This is where having an original artistic sensibility becomes crucial. If your critical writing doesn't swell with articulate enthusiasm for what is indispensable about a certain kind of theater, then it stands no chance of seeming indispensable itself. Time was, a critic like Max Beerbohm, who confessed his indifference to theater but possessed a charmingly urbane style that made people feel like eavesdroppers at exclusive dinner parties, had a place in a society that regarded theater as essential and scarcely less eternal than the British monarchy. No longer. Today's critics must remake the public conversation, not presume to stand above it. They must create, in their own little corners of a glutted environment, a climate in which it seems normal to care. Shaw "manufactured the evidence" (his phrase) that the new drama he envisioned already existed, and the force of his vision helped engender the reality. His example is the preeminent reminder of how the language of criticism can be procreative.

Having said this, however, I hasten to add that no critic has an obligation to be kind to individual productions. The more you publish, the more your so-called friends will harangue you about industry solidarity and regale you with heartrending tales of poverty and vulnerability. They will ask, in all candor, "Hey, aren't we all on the same side?" Guess what: These people don't really respect your opinion. Their question

comes from essentially the same censorious impulse that objected to dissent and criticism of U.S. government policy after September 11—hey, aren't we all patriots?—and it is beneath response. Any art so vulnerable that it needs euphemized reviews to survive ought to be put out of its misery, just as any country that needs to outlaw flag-burning ought to think again about what loyalty means. The bigger question is, as John Donatich, the publisher of Basic Books, recently put it: "How do we battle the gravitation toward happy consensus that paralyzes our national debate?" Or again Wilde says it well: "A critic cannot be fair in the ordinary sense of the word. It is only about things that do not interest one that one can give a really unbiased opinion, which is no doubt the reason why an unbiased opinion is always absolutely valueless."

### 3. STRETCH THE ENVELOPE. GRASP THE APPARATUS.

Brecht wrote in 1930 that "by imagining that they have got hold of an apparatus which in fact has got hold of them [artists] are supporting an apparatus which is out of their control." Brecht was speaking of film, radio, and theater practitioners, but his remark is especially true of critics. If you ever gain access to a mass-market publication, I urge you to remember that, whatever the short-term satisfactions, you will be judged strictly in the long run by your conduct in that circumstance. Failing to grasp the apparatus will ensure that it grasps you. I won't preach obligations to you, but I will opine that any writing that tacitly accepts the preconditions of consumer society can not be, properly speaking, critical.

One needn't be a revolutionary. Even small gestures like broaching a subject beyond the cramped purview of pop culture, or clearly explaining an unfamiliar or slightly complex idea, can stretch the envelope noticeably. I see criticism as a form of resistance in an age when the agents of power (big media and politicians) have co-opted the language of rebellion to the point where counterrebellion is often indistinguishable from rebellion. There is a tiny but tremendously important opportunity in the fact that some arts—theater, dance, poetry—aren't usually considered worthy of commodification by the mass media, and my work tries to wedge that window open. Utopian ardor doesn't make me any paragon of honesty, of course. Often enough, I get my fingers jammed in the sash or grow infuriated when there's nothing but cotton candy outside the window for weeks on end, and then I'm as capable of venom and compromise as everyone else.

The main point to recognize is that questions of personal integrity are inseparable from questions about grasping the apparatus, particularly in high-profile circumstances where critics are made to feel they must make compromises with celebrity culture to keep their jobs. A fascinating case study is John Lahr, who frequently writes long, flattering celebrity profiles in the same magazine where he is the chief theater critic. Is this inappropriate or dishonest? It certainly deepens the public's confusion

over the difference between criticism and promotion. The area is gray, however. The question is analogous to John Leonard's misgivings (to take only the first two examples from his recent screed in the *Nation*) about whether Thomas Friedman should have played tennis with the secretary of state when he covered the State Department for the *Times*, or whether Brit Hume should have played tennis with President Bush when he covered the White House for ABC. Most people nowadays would undoubtedly say "who cares?" to all these queries—recognizing that access is power. That is precisely why critics must care, and hold their integrity more dear than the public does.

#### 4. GIVE UP THE GOAL OF POWER.

You can't avoid having power as a critic, but you should give it up as a goal. The sooner you do this, the happier you'll be. For most people, theater criticism isn't a profession, it's a calling, and the long-term satisfaction is in moving minds, not tickets. The fact that most of the approbation and opprobrium that one is subject to as a critic has to do with the movement of tickets can be distracting and confusing, but you must never take that personally. Both the praise and the blame are about advertising, not art or ideas. In any case, producers and publicists today know perfectly well that unfavorable reviews are far better than no reviews. In fact, they're often as good as favorable ones because so many people don't really read but rather skim headers and headlines on the way to the listings and personal ads. Simply getting an event covered is the real PR coup nowadays, even in the anxiety-producing *New York Times*. I mention all this to lift a potential burden off you before it ever settles in.

As Richard Gilman once said succinctly: "The critic cannot give his loyalty to men and institutions since he owes it to something a great deal more permanent. He owes it, of course, to truth and to dramatic art."

And here is the subtler point: the essence of theater in our time, I think, isn't in power but rather the opposite. Václav Havel, the playwright turned statesman, a quintessential outsider turned insider, said in his 1991 memoir *Disturbing the Peace*: "An inseparable part of the kind of theater I've been drawn to all my life is a touch of obscurity, of decay or degeneration, of frivolity. I don't know quite what to call it; I think theater should always be somewhat suspect." He was onto something fundamental. Broadway and Disney notwithstanding, theater in the new millennium is not about to become any sort of brave new world of perfect technology or Apollonian hardware; its long-term destiny is to be the toilsome domain of "meatware" and "wetware" rehearsing our ancient, ritualistic system failures, again and again. The artist who understood this best was the "crossover" avant-gardist Samuel Beckett, an unwitting prophet of the media age who has so far withstood its best efforts to brand and trivialize him. "To be an artist," wrote Beckett in 1949, "is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living."

## 5. WRITE JOURNALISM. READ BEYOND IT.

Journalistic criticism is bridge-building—bringing unfamiliar ideas to a general audience, connecting demanding art to a reluctant public, reaching across the borders of established institutions, professions, and disciplines. No one can cross a bridge that isn't anchored securely on both banks, however. The world has quite enough academics who don't write lucidly enough to hold a general audience, thank you very much, and quite enough journalists who don't know enough to offer anything but stagnant opinions. The rarity are those in the middle—real ambassadors who can play to both sides. So sharpen your writing, work on it at every opportunity, but also keep yourself informed about at least some of what is written for more specialized audiences—and not just in theater. Journalism is seductive, the more so for intelligent and ambitious writers, who can easily wake up decades into their careers and discover that they have squandered their best ideas without having done justice to them. The only protection is to keep one piling in a deeper pool, so to speak.

## 6. GROUND YOUR WORK IN KNOWLEDGE, NOT STYLE.

Some of you are no doubt wondering at this point, “What about fun? Don't delight, enjoyment, and entertainment come into the equation at all?” Absolutely. I, for one, get more pure enjoyment out of good theater than I do from most other pursuits, and I try to convey that in my writing. Recently, I had a medical condition that paralyzed half my face for months, and when I went to see Edward Albee's *The Goat* I laughed so hard at one joke that a spasm developed in my deadened cheek and jump-started my healing. I tell you this not just to amuse you, however, but to illustrate where the majority of pseudocritics begin and end their ruminations: with stories about themselves and their deep feelings that are, at best, precritical. So far, I've told you nothing critical about Edward Albee; I've told you about my cheek, a subject hard to construe as momentous or urgent, no matter how amusing you may find it. The point is, the pleasure of deep feeling never needs defending in the United States; the pleasure of good thinking always does.

Here's a practical test you might apply: pick up any newspaper or magazine review and read it with an eye to whether it could be transferred to the Sunday Styles section of the *New York Times* without jarring anyone's sensibilities. If the answer is yes, then you have discovered a stylist in critic's clothing. A stylist is someone who thinks the world is all attitude, and that any hip point of view and mode of expression ought to apply equally to clothing, jewelry, furniture, kitchenware, food, bands, clubs, and, oh yes, dramatic masterpieces. Reflexive feeling is all, reflection is nil, and most of the time the first-person pronoun is a sort of verbal shill, avoiding responsibility while seeming to accept it (“this is just my opinion”). To place masterpieces in such a per-

son's hands is like leaving a national forest in the care of a theme-park owner. A stylist is a caretaker of recycled culture, a blind monster that feeds on itself. A critic is an independent human being with open eyes, who knows what and where to eat.

#### 7. BE FEMALE, AT LEAST SOMETIMES.

Obviously, this will come easier to those of you who happen to be women, but not being female is no excuse for never thinking about it. The majority of theater critics have always been men, and even today, when some of our best theater writers are women (Erika Munk, Alisa Solomon, Elinor Fuchs, Una Chaudhuri), there is only one female lead critic (Linda Winer, at *Newsday*) at a major newspaper in the New York area. More women need to get involved in this field, and more men need to tap their repressed female sympathies. I say this not just for the sake of parity but because I suspect our male critics (perhaps myself included) have not always totally understood the work of innovative female artists, especially playwrights. Let me sidestep the nettled question of how to define "female artistic sensibility" and simply state that I believe there is one, and that I see it in Maria Irene Fornes, Joan Schenkar, Erin Cressida Wilson, the experimental Beth Henley of *Impossible Marriage*, and elsewhere. Critical justice has not been done to these authors, and if this is a disgrace, it is also an opening.

#### 8. DON'T REVIEW EVERYTHING.

There is a time in your life when you should see everything, and for most of you, it is now. You must fill up your imaginations with the richest possible array of theater art so that you needn't ever rely on anyone else's assessment of excellence, astonishment, mendacity, or mediocrity. Money is an issue, I realize, but there are many ways around expensive tickets, from ushering, to arranging group outings, to internships at theaters and theatrical organizations. Access aside, however, once you have acquired a solid grounding, it's also essential to recognize when to start being discriminating. Many a fine critic has been destroyed by the strain of constantly seeking new ways to describe the same old inadequacies, or by the intellectual palsy born of a sustained diet of histrionic junk food. Don't be a casualty. Know when and how to save up your two cents until you can afford pearls.

9. WRITE LETTERS TO CRITICS.

The lack of an active give-and-take between critics and their readers in America has everything to do with the editorial prejudice against theater I described before. Since even the most famous critics get far less mail than they would ever admit, respectful responses to them, even disagreements, have a much greater chance of being printed than similar letters to other journalists. So the next time you find yourself grumbling with dismay that a theater event you loved or hated isn't the subject of lively public interest, don't suffer in silence. Reach for your keyboard, and let 'em have it. And remember to address the letter to the editor, not the critic, or else it *will* get stuffed in a drawer.

That's about as much advice as I imagine anyone can bear in a single afternoon, so I'll quit while I'm still standing and leave you with just one last proposition. If, having listened to me, any of you now look into your heart and find that you are not on my side, that you don't crave the admiration of those who read, that you have no urge to refine a vision of your own, that you secretly do covet power, or that you actually do revere the stylists, hatchet-men, and blurb-whores around you, then I beg of you, please, do us all a favor and write about Hollywood and television instead of theater.