

PART 4 OUTLOOK

A CRITIC

IS NEVER WRONG

– Essay by Rui Pina Coelho, Portugal

I found myself involved in the T.E.E.N. project as a theatre critic and, for me, the most crucial aspect of this project has been how criticism is used as a tool to activate dialogue between teenagers and theatre professionals, rather than just developing the teenagers' skills as young critics for the sake of it.

1. WHAT IS CRITICISM

GOOD FOR?

A critic is never wrong! A critic is never wrong for the same reason that he is never right either. That is not the 'game'. It is not, I think, a question of whether to find the correct way to read a performance. A

critic is never right or wrong. The task of criticism is neither validation nor refutation of an artistic object. The only thing a critic can do is react as honestly as possible, and in the most transparent way possible, to the performance in which he participates. And with that, what the critic does is expand the zone of impact of a performance, prolonging its life and bringing it to the city, inscribing it in the public sphere. Thus, theatre criticism, when it serves something, serves to provoke the memory and to start a discussion. Though it may seem simple, this is one of the most difficult and important tasks of a critic's work. What is disturbing, however, is that the activity of criticism is still - although very close to extinction - one of the last strongholds where interference in the public sphere is possible. The role of critics should aim to unite the individual and the audience to the public sphere and the collective, as Terry Eagleton (2005) understands. This problem is not just confined to criticism. It is, in fact, a problem faced by most Western societies dominated by a capitalist logic, submerged in consumerism and publicity, indifferent to the arts, and with a lack of debate in the public sphere. But criticism still has a chance to interfere in the city - it is part of its function and its vocation. Criticism, when it serves anything, serves as an effective weapon against contemporary acedia. Saving criticism can, perhaps, save us all.

2. THE EXERCISE OF A PROFOUND SUBJECTIVITY

Honesty and transparency are accompanied by subjectivity. The exercise of criticism, I believe, can only be done with the awareness that it is the expression of a subjectivity. There is no objective data on how one understands a performance. Nor is there necessarily any objectivity in the way a critic gives account to his reception of a performance. The critic's relationship with a performance is unique, private, idiosyncratic. Of course, we have identities shaped, in part, by the cultural context in which we are inserted. And of course, we all share a large number of features with those around us. But, ultimately, there are aspects to the identity of a critic (as there are of any individual) that are not shareable with anyone else. They are directly affected by their readings, their ideological matrix, their age, their provenance, their state of mind - a hypothetically infinite set of variables. In my view, it is impossible to find a review that provides a last word on the subject. Criticism must be closer to dialogue than to authority; must be closer to experience than to reading; must be closer to democracy than to absolutism; must be closer to subjectivity than

to objectivity; must be closer to passion than to impartiality; must be closer to error than to lesson; must be closer to poetry than to science.

3. CRITICISM AND CULTURAL JOURNALISM

I believe that criticism has nothing to do with journalism. I believe that performing arts criticism has nothing to do with cultural journalism. And I also believe that nothing has accelerated the disappearance of criticism more than the growing confusion between the former and the latter. In the limited space devoted to the performing arts in most media publications, cultural journalism has been gaining ground in criticism and, perhaps unintentionally, throwing it off the pages of newspapers (and magazines and so on). The problem is not cultural journalism itself - which has a major role in spreading and promoting the arts. Nor am I referring to the dingy, boorish distinction between a so-called journalistic critique and a so-called academic critique - this distinction is more than outdated. The problem lies in the fact that cultural and critical journalism play different roles.

Both important and central but, ultimately, different. It is easy to imagine an editor who, after devoting two whole pages to a performance on the day of its premiere, complete with text exploring the main themes, lavish quotations from the director or actors, and stunning production photographs, would dispense of yet more text – a review of the same performance – given the scarce space for the arts in a newspaper. It is easy to excuse this editor – but it is also urgent to remember that this is a wrong decision. Cultural and critical journalism play different roles. Both are important and central but they are, ultimately, different.

4. THE PARTICIPATION OF THE CRITIC

In the section above, I wrote – not by mistake – “to the performance in which he [the critic] participates” and not “to the performance he watches.” In fact, long gone are the times when a spectator / critic was under the dominance of the semantics imposed by an all-powerful director. This was the reality of theatre and criticism for much of the twentieth century and it is this difficult (if not impossible) relationship that imbues many of the contemporary misunderstandings between critics and creators. What you see onstage is not always what is there.

Sometimes it is not possible and sometimes it is not wanted. There is a certain criticism that is associated with the alleged crisis of the *mise-en-scène*. To a large extent, this crisis results in the inefficiency of a performance analysis model based exclusively on the instruments of semiotics. Roughly, it was accepted that the performance could be “read”; that everything that appeared on stage would have a reading; that all signs would correspond to a signifier and a meaning; that these signs were arranged by the performance’s author (the director); that the spectator / critic would be able to decode what was presented to him; that of course, there would be something to be decoded; and that the decoded meaning would be able to be shared by a particular cultural community. The relation that would be established with the spectator was, necessarily, a hierarchical relation.

However, the spectator has long since been ‘emancipated’ from this dictatorship. They were emancipated from the moment in which they began to distrust the reciprocity between meaning and signifier and from the moment in which new performances demanded a new set of instruments of analysis. Thus, terms such as energetic theatre (Lyotard), performative theatre (Féral), post-dramatic theatre (Lehmann) or rhapsodic theatre (Sarrazac) account for a new paradigm of representation. This emerged from the 1970s, where they emphasised more evanescent qualities such as presence, energy, and the very relationship with the audience,

thereby exploring aspects that can hardly be semiotisable, that is, translated into signs.

Thus, rather than watching a performance passively, critics and spectators participate in the very creation of the performance; more than watching a performance, critics and spectators 'experience' the performance. In this way, the emphasis of his critique or analysis is, of course, on the expression of his uniqueness or subjectivity.

5. PITY THE POOR

THEATRE CRITIC

Of course, the more subjective the critic is, the more exposed he becomes to misunderstandings. These misconceptions have resulted in many colourful arguments. The ironic verve of the Irish playwright Brendan Behan is amusing: "Critics are like eunuchs in a harem: they know how it's done, they've seen it done every day, but they're unable to do it themselves." Or Théophile Gautier: "The critic who never produced anything is a coward; it is like an abbot who makes the court of the wife of a layman: he cannot do the same, nor can he be beaten with him." Or the playwright - and critic - George Bernard Shaw: "A drama critic is a man who leaves no turn unstoned." The Elizabethan Thomas Dekker provocatively stated

in *News from Hell* (1608): "Beware of critics: they are like fish, they bite everything, especially books." Irving Wardle, a noted writer and critic of British theatre, asserts that they are often seen as a sort of separate race, such as numismatists, taxonomists, or executioners (Wardle 1992: vii). For Christopher Hampton, "Asking a playwright what he thinks about the critics is like asking a lamp-post what he thinks about dogs." This brief collection denotes some of the mistrust and discomfort with which theatre criticism was first entangled. Indeed, even today, in the present discourse, it is not difficult to find the same mistrust. Critics are often regarded as mere parasites of the art of others and are often accused of showing presumptions of intellectual superiority. However, if the dialogue between criticism's established conventions and the present is often difficult and full of misunderstanding, it is also certain that many of the memorable moments in the history of the theatre have largely been achieved thanks to an attentive criticism that goes against established opinions. In addition to this synchronic importance, theatre criticism has been of undeniable importance in the preservation of memory. It has an additional historical responsibility as a privileged instrument used to study the history of the theatre and to reconstitute theatrical experiences. "What they say about my plays does not matter, my plays will outlast the critics; but what they say about my performances matters a lot, because what they write is all that posterity will have on the subject", wrote Bertolt Brecht.

6. ON THE HISTORY OF CRITICISM

Of complex etymological root, the word 'critical' derives from the Greek *krinein*, that means to "break" and, simultaneously, to put in crisis, and also *kritos*, that implies a judgment. It is the latter meaning that has prevailed - that of the issuance of a judicious judgment on a work of art. However, as we know it today, it is closely linked to the emergence of the written press in the eighteenth century and to the consequent journalistic coverage of theatrical activity. In the newspapers, theatre criticism summarised the plots of the performances, with a sprinkling of everything from rumours to behind-the-

scenes gossip. Theatre criticism, by this time, was extremely subordinate to the observance of rules and canons. The work of the critic amounted to that of a vigilant police officer in any non-observance of the laws of dramatic art. Added to this was the increasing commercialisation of art and the exponential rise in importance of the commercial status of artistic objects. With the public and the market entering the equation, the critic gained an added importance as mediator and artistic consultant to the emerging consumers.

With the advent of the star rating system and its mastery over all aspects of theatrical activity, criticism took on the role of comparing performances and interpretations, quickly realising that the classics should not be preserved as immutable standards of quality and aesthetic value but as dynamic and open starting points

for reinterpretation. In this vein, it is the casting decisions that often change the performance in the most noticeable way. The critic William Hazlitt said enthusiastically in *'On Actors and Acting'* (1817): "Actors are the 'brief and abstract chronicles of our time'; the burlesque representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites. Your life is a voluntary dream, a studied madness. Their ambition is to be outside themselves. Today kings, tomorrow beggars, are nothing but when they are themselves" (*apud* Ward 1945: 101, t.m.). And Hazlitt, defending the singularity of his comments, said: "My opinions have sometimes been classified as singular: but they are only sincere. I say what I think; and I think what I feel" (*apud* McDonald 2007: 66). The paradigm shift from "Does this obey the rules?" to "What do I feel?" paved the way for some eccentricity and subjectivity in the exercise of criticism, leading theatrical professionals to develop a (sometimes well-founded) dislike of criticism.

The journey of theatrical criticism in the twentieth century follows the experimentation of different instruments for the analysis of the performances. During this period, theatre criticism gained various functions and modulations. Since it is understood to act as a watchman of good taste (read this as 'of the dominant taste'), as an accomplice of creation, as a part of the dramaturgic work, as a translator of the new, or as a counsellor to the purchase of the ticket, theatre criticism has experimented with such instruments as

formalism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, phenomenology, and deconstruction among others, thereby navigating between aesthetics, philosophy, history, literature, and journalism.

7. THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF CRITICISM AND NEW MEDIA

The current situation that theatre criticism finds itself in is precarious insofar as it depends, traditionally, on a *medium* that is also suffering. The general press is facing increasing difficulties and restructurings in search of identity in a world increasingly dominated by new media formats. However, despite the historic reputation of theatre criticism and the increasing influence of public opinion (especially with the advent of the blogosphere) it is important to maintain the role of a professional, experienced, and skilled critic. Having sufficiently recognised competency and authority can lead to the important discovery of neglected works or proposals that would otherwise remain unknown. It is true that the press and specialist journals also play an extremely important role in that they enable a longer, more demanding dialogue with readers. However, by specialising in this way they lose breadth of scope, which makes it difficult for theatre criticism to inscribe a performance in the public consciousness.

The internet, particularly through blogs, also plays a pivotal role in the survival and renewal of theatre criticism. With the advent and democratisation of opinion through the blogosphere, theatre criticism has gained new, more accessible, and more agile support. This allows theatre reviews to have a greater degree of specialisation and also, potentially, to be more directed to certain niches of interest. However, this does run the risk of creating tight circles of hermetic discussions that, in turn, work against the spirit of general public discussion.

I confess that I do not believe that the survival of criticism can only be achieved by migrating its form to digital formats. I do not believe that its survival is only dependent on finding a new medium. It may exist but it must be a criticism that can fulfil its social function.

8. STRESS FREE

Given the current state of affairs, rather than anticipating or decrying the death of critics, it is important that they reinvent their practice, innovate with media and training methods, and deepen its capacity for intervention in the public sphere. Its historical importance in the development of the arts - and the theatre in particular - should not be neglected or ignored but it is important to establish that its true mission is the promotion of synchronous dialogue with the contemporary performing arts.

9. THINKING ABOUT PERFORMANCES FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

All of this may be very well but when we think of performances for young audiences these questions about performing arts criticism can get even further complicated. What is the value of publishing my experience of a performance when it was intended for an age group other than mine? Am I not always deprived of a synchronous experience with the performance? Is the adult critic always standing outside a kind of invisible cord that separates him from the performance? Just as I, a forty-three-year-old Marxist born in Évora (Portugal), cannot pretend to be a twenty-year-old girl or an eighty-year-old man, I cannot pretend to experience the performance as a six-year-old child. And so, we return to the exercise of profound subjectivity. The only thing a critic can do is react as honestly as possible, and in the most transparent way as possible, to the performance in which he participates. The exercise of criticism, I believe, can only be done with an awareness that it is an expression of absolute subjectivity.

Further to this belief that the critic's subjectivity must be expressed, I have found four aspects useful to bear in mind when analysing a performance

for young audiences. The first aspect to consider, it seems to me, is its construction. That is, all the questions related to the quality and originality of the materiality of the performance (i.e. the scenery, props, costumes). The second aspect is everything concerning the narrative construction of the performance (i.e. the exegetical processes, the stylistic choices involved, the rhetoric). A third aspect is the quality of the interpretation or puppet manipulation. And lastly, the dramaturgy of the performance needs to be considered. Dramaturgy, understood here as meaning, relevance, or the way the performance relates and penetrates into life and the world, can dispense with good construction,

a good narrative, and good interpretation / manipulation. Sometimes it is the ineffable things that best account for our experience in life and in the theatre.

Having said that, it is important to remember that a critic is never wrong! A critic is never wrong for the same reason that he is never right either. That is not the 'game'. The only thing a critic can do is react as honestly as possible, in the most transparent way possible, to the performance in which he participates.

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