

# 3

## Criticism

### The “Why” of Theatre Criticism

“What is the value of theatre criticism? Why is it something worth learning and studying? I know what I like and what I don’t. Isn’t that all that matters?” Well, maybe you know what you like, but can you articulate it in theatrical terms? Are you able to say, “This element of a particular play worked for me and this one didn’t, and this is why? And who needs to know this stuff, anyway? I have no interest in being a theatre critic, so why should it matter?” Well, what if you want to be a director? Obviously, you would need to know why a scene is working or why it isn’t. In addition, you need to speak the same language as the designer in order to articulate your artistic vision. Perhaps you see a scene as intense and angry, and the set designer sees it as jagged and crimson. It could be the same thing or not. Suppose you want to be a professional stage manager. After the show opens, in many cases it will be your responsibility to maintain the show and the director’s vision. Or, if it’s a long run, you will need to install replacement actors. Stage managers often think of themselves merely as technicians, but they are far more, particularly in this case. They need to have their creative tools sharpened and at the ready. Let’s say you are an actor, and you don’t like your costume. You need to be able to tell the director and the designer *why* it doesn’t work for you. Creating a costume takes time and costs money. They cannot keep designing and building new ones until

you say, "Eureka! That's it!" There are many stories of well-established directors watching a scene and saying to an actor, "No. That's not it." The actor normally replies, "Okay. What would you like me to do differently?" The director simply says, "I don't know. But that's not it." Do you see how incredibly unhelpful this is to the artistic process?

Similarly, I went through a period where I was writing a lot of spec scripts for television shows. (A "spec" is a sample script for an existing television program.) Luckily, I had the opportunity to show my work to some very successful television writers. Several of them responded by saying, "Here's the way I would have written it." Not only was that somewhat insulting, but it also wasn't helping me to become a better writer or to learn from my mistakes. I didn't need to know what *they* would have written. I wanted to know how they responded to what *I* had written. It's like that corny, old joke, "How many theatre students does it take to screw in a light bulb?" The answer: "Ten. One to screw it in and nine to say, 'I could have done that so much better!'" That doesn't help the person who screwed it in to learn what they did wrong or how they could have done it better. In a similar vein, certain directors and professors suffer from what I call "The Seagull Syndrome": they fly by, defecate all over something, and keep right on going. Again, this is not process oriented, nor does it help the artist to grow. Developing your critical eye is something that will hold you in good stead for the rest of your life, whether or not you continue to work in the theatre. We all fancy ourselves to be critics. The question becomes this: How do we learn to express our critical opinions intelligently? As playwright Craig Wright states so eloquently, "A bad painting is just a bad painting. But a bad *play*, you have to *sit* through!"

In addition to what is covered in this chapter, there are incredibly eloquent comments on this topic covered in the next chapter, “The Interviews,” under the subheading “On Critics and Theatre Criticism.” While there are a number of collections of critical essays and collections of reviews, there aren’t many books on how to actually *write* criticism. I hope you will find this helpful and informative.

There are several points to consider when writing a critique for a work of art. While we will discuss these in terms of a play, these same rules apply to film, music, literature, dance, sculpture, painting, or any of the creative arts. And since this is a book on writing for the theatre, we will focus on the written aspects of a critique for a play or musical.

The great German poet, playwright, and critic Johann Wolfgang von Goethe maintained that three questions be asked about any work of art:

1. What is the artist trying to do?
2. How well did they do it?
3. Was it worth the doing?

Goethe felt the questions must be answered in order, because you cannot answer number three without properly answering one and two. Let’s take a look at each of these:

#### **1) “What Is the Artist Trying to Do?”**

A play is meant to be seen and experienced. Yes, a play can be read, but that is not its primary intention. This really comes down to determining the theme of the work and what the director and playwright are trying to say.

#### **2) “How Well Did They Do It?”**

Obviously, this comes down to opinion. Did the actor hit that emotional peak? Did the dancer complete the double pirouette? Did the designer get their metaphors across?

### **3) “Was It Worth the Doing?”**

Have you ever seen a play and said to yourself, “Well, I get what the playwright was *trying* to say, but they didn’t really achieve it.” If you can see the attempt, regardless of whether or not they succeeded, it was worth doing. It takes months or even years to create a piece of theatre. It can take moments to destroy it. Sometimes, theatre students think it’s their right and privilege to decimate someone else’s creation. It’s not. When critiquing a piece of theatre or any work of art, a good rule of thumb is to start by finding three things you liked about it. The harder it may be, the more necessary it becomes in order to gain some objectivity on the work as a whole.