

SOME "Nuts and Bolts" THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ART AND CRAFT of the CRITICAL RESPONSE

by Judith Royer

INTRODUCTORY THOUGHTS:

1. THE CRITICAL RESPONSE IS AN ART FORM IN ITS OWN RIGHT.

One of the most underrated art forms is the art of criticism. There is certainly a shortage of good critics in the media. In most cities, even major papers cannot afford to hire a well-trained reviewer to cover so little live theatre. I can remember working at one regional theatre in a mid-sized city and being reviewed by the most influential local reviewer who, I later learned, sold shoes to pay his bills. In order to survive, too many T.V. and film critics have had to find an angle or a showcase personality that is more important than their qualifications as a critic. There is a popular idea that anyone who has seen a few shows and likes theatre can be a critic. It is important that we in KCACTF are not affected by this attitude. Critical response to a theatre event is a craft that must be learned just as we learn the crafts of acting, designing, or directing for the theatre. In the hands of a good critic, that craft may even be raised to the level of an art. While I would hope we are all striving for the latter, we must be sure that those whom we send to respond to the work of our college and university colleagues and their students know at least the craft of criticism. We'll hope the art comes thereafter.

How do we assure the quality of critical response in our regions? First we need to choose our best critics to do on-site responses. We need people who are sensitive, well trained in the theatre, and who keep current with new developments in that art around the world. I believe every region should institute a quality control process for adjudication/response. At the heart of every Regional Festival should be a Respondents Workshop, instituted for new and old timers alike. Such a workshop would allow the region to develop a pool of well-trained respondents. It allows at least one time a year when those who have been at the job for some time can refine their skills and renew their energies as respondents. It also provides an opportunity for recruitment of, and in-service training for, new members of the regional adjudication/response team.

After completing some form of in-service, new respondents might profitably continue their training by being sent out a few times with the region's most experienced and competent respondents. They should go solo only after they have gained an ease and confidence in the process. The practice of sending out people who have never done a response in this format, simply because we must find a "body" to cover that school, is unconscionable. The on-site public response is often the first and only contact a college/company will have with KCACTF. A badly trained or insensitive respondent can spell the death of that school's future with this organization. We all know horror stories about students and faculty who have been damaged by an incompetent or insensitive response. Our first and foremost responsibility in this organization must be to minimize that possibility. We can do so by providing top-notch training for our respondents and by developing some method of monitoring on-site responses by formal or informal feedback from companies to which respondents are sent.

2. THE CRITICAL RESPONSE IS A COLLEGIAL PROCESS.

A newspaper or media critic does not come into contact with the people to whom he or she is responding. In KCACTF we are colleagues responding to other colleagues and their students. The production faculty/staff look to us to assist them in the educational process. Their students look to us, as they look to their own faculty directors and mentors, as role models for the profession.

Each of us needs to establish a collegial atmosphere for the response. We are not our region's "great gurus," the ones who have all the answers. We are colleagues of the faculty/staff production team and, like them, are involved in the on-going process of trying to solve the unique challenges each new play poses. KCACTF response is a process of sharing with the company our thoughts about which of the play's challenges have been well met, what solutions have been hinted at but not fully realized, and what problems have not yet been recognized. Good respondents find their own way to establish a collegial environment. If more creative ways fail, one can simply share with the company statements such as those found at the beginning of this paragraph. Other kinds of prefaces might include statements such as: "I have not walked this process with you for the last six or more weeks. I do not know the problems that you faced: the designer you lost last week, your budget or lack of it, the actor who had to be replaced at the last minute, and so on. I only see what is on the stage in front of me tonight, just as your director sees only what is on the stage when he or she comes to respond to one of my shows. I am a new set of eyes. I am someone who can say a little more than your family or friends, who only want to know how you 'learned all those lines!' I am not here to re-direct your show or to solve its problems. I am here to share with you what seemed to read well to an audience, what did yet not seem to be fully realized, and what aspects of this play's special production challenges you might continue to explore."

One thing that often reassures a company is putting their work into an educational perspective. For example, we might remind them that a two or three week run on a campus is similar to two or three weeks of previews a professional show will present before opening. The professional company has the luxury of allowing the show to continue to grow under the tutelage of the audience. The same is true for the college/university production.

On the other hand, it is good to remind the company that this particular response has less to do with "what you should go back and change in this production" than "how you might approach the work again should you have a chance to remount it." Having already solved so many production challenges, what might be the next thing the company would like to see happen in their show? This emphasis on the "next time around" also helps the respondent avoid doing damage to the production in its current run. It is always wise to remind the company that, if they get some new insight about a character or about the play during this response, they should not change the next night's performance to accommodate that insight without checking with the director and consulting other company members who may be affected by it.

3. A CRITICAL RESPONSE SHOULD BE OBJECTIVE.

A well-trained critic works out of a pool of knowledge coupled with a method of response that minimizes subjectivity. The quickest way to kill communication at the beginning of a response is to say, "When I did this play . . ." or "What I think this play is about . . ." The critic needs to find a place from which to speak, a place which somehow links the work of the artists on this production with the response. The most solid, common ground I can suggest is the text itself. If the critic begins with the text, what that text promises on the page, and how that promise is realized or not realized on the stage, there is a place at which both the critic and the company can safely meet. If one starts with the text, one is starting at the same place from which one hopes the company has started. It is not a matter of "how I feel" or "how they feel" about the production, but what are the intrinsic challenges this work gives to any artist who approaches it. The respondent and the company can look at the work together, sharing the adventure of a journey into this text and mutually exploring its challenges.

In dealing with the text, the respondent might identify one or two keys to the personality of the particular work. These few points may then become the focus or organizing principle for the response. A good response is not a matter of finding a lot of little details to talk about, but of finding a few key points that provide an organized way of talking about this particular work.

For example, if one is responding to a play like Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, one is dealing with a play about people filling time with linguistic games. If the company is approaching the piece as American realism or does not understand the dramatic nature of language in the play, the rest of your work as a critic may well be defined by the task of helping the group discover these additional theatrical dimensions and how they impact acting, directing, or design choices in production.

We have all responded to too many productions of plays by Neil Simon that lack a fundamental understanding of either a "New York sensibility" or a basic command of the craft of comedy. If the first is missing, then a respondent might deal with ways of discovering that original sensibility or substituting it with something equivalent and more accessible to a local audience. If the latter is missing, the response might deal with some fundamentals of comic timing: set-ups, punch lines, follow-through, and physical business appropriate for this form. There are some "givens" for any play that should be addressed. We should respect a company's interpretation of a play, but we should also understand and support the author's original intentions, seeing how these are helped or hindered by this production's approach to a piece.

Let's look at another example. One is invited to do a response to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In order to make a statement about a parallel predominance of violence in our own time, the director has made a choice to eliminate all layers of interpretation in the play except those relating to the theme of violence. If you are a Shakespeare "purist," you will be outraged by this violation of the text. If you believe that Shakespeare should be made relevant to our times, you may be thrilled by this new approach. However, it is not your job to impose your position on the company one way or the other. Both positions exist in critical thought. Your dilemma might be how to find a way of responding respectfully to this interpretation while still upholding the integrity of the original text.

One approach might be to define the critical dilemma with some introduction like, *"I'm sure you've had interesting responses to your production thus far. Shakespeare 'purists' have probably been outraged, and those who believe Shakespeare should speak to our times have applauded your efforts. Now, let's look at what you have gained and what you have lost by your choices. Let's see what some of the traps are into which this choice can lead you in production."* The response that follows might then deal with staging, design, directing, and acting choices which have continued to flatten out the original text or which have it opened up in an exciting new way.

For instance, if design and directing choices have already hammered home the violence theme, it may be wise for actors not to do so. They may make acting choices which give as much dimension and humanity as possible to their characters, in order to portray them as people trying to survive within a violent world rather than making the theme itself their acting choice.

The directorial concept might be enhanced or clarified by some theatrical tension or dramatic counterpoint, especially in the acting. The response that might follow from such an introduction could still be respectful of the director's interpretation while opening additional options for realizing that concept in production. It also removes the necessity for the respondent to take a personal or subjective stance regarding the director's interpretation. intentions, seeing how these are helped or hindered by this production's approach to a piece.

The respondent defines the field, and then deals with the pros and cons of choices made within it. The respondent has educated the company regarding its options, but the information has been set in an objective, critical context, with final choices still being in the hands of the company

Whatever choices a respondent makes should be grounded in some objective, critical position, preferably those provided by the challenges and demands of the script, and should be guided by a few organizing principles or insights rather than presented as a series of subjective, scattered impressions about the play or production.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF A RESPONSE.

Using the approach suggested above, the actual response often breaks down into the following four sections:

1. A Lead Line, or Hook: the respondent's initial approach to the company, tuning in and gaining trust;
2. The Script: the unique challenges of the script the script offers got production and how these have been realized or not in this particular production;
3. Design/Technical: how script challenges have been realized by the design/technical aspects;
4. Acting: how script challenges have been realized in individual performances.

The Lead Line, or **Hook**: The most critical choice you will make as a respondent is the manner in which you decide to approach the company. Written reviews catch the eye of the reader by the lead line or hook. Oral responses require a verbal equivalent. In addition to catching the

attention of an audience, as a writer must do, the oral respondent must break down the company's apprehension about the process and garner their trust.

Lead lines are as varied as the people who deliver them and respondents are encouraged to develop a personal style in constructing lead lines. Some may choose to be emotionally open or honest about how the play has moved them by simply sharing that fact. Obviously, find another way into the process if you hated the play or production. Many respondents prefer more formal, more literary or theatrical introductions.

For example, Davey Marlin-Jones began a public, Regional Festival response to a production of *The Trojan Women* by saying "A wise man once said, 'If you are traveling in the mountains and come across a five-hundred foot crevice over you must jump in order to continue on your way, jump -- but don't stop half way across.'" The company held their breath, as Mr. Marlin-Jones gave one of his dramatically pregnant pauses, and waited for him to tell them whether they had made it across or had fallen into the crevice with their production. When he spoke again, he said, "Congratulations, you didn't stop half-way." The company was ready to hear anything Davey Marlin-Jones said after that. He had set up the fact that it was a difficult show, providing them with unusual challenges, but that overall it had been boldly approached and executed and worth the effort.

On another occasion, responding to a play that was essentially a character study, Davey Marlin-Jones made a dramatic entrance dressed in many layers of clothing. As he began to speak about how the surface layers of a character are unmasked or stripping away in the course of a play, he began to remove first his hat, then his tie, then his jacket, and finally a vest, until people realized that he was not merely becoming more comfortable, but actually dramatizing his point with this physical metaphor.

While lead lines may vary in style and intention, their purpose is similar: get the group's attention, earn their trust, and establish a viable context for the response that will follow. If you prepare no other part of your response before you meet with the company, prepare a lead line.

The Script: If a response begins with discussion of the demands of the script, presentation of the two to three central points you are making about the script may take between fifteen and twenty minutes of a typically hour long response. During this time, the respondent may deal with the unique personality and production needs of the text, specific challenges the company faced in translating these from the page to the stage and how successful they were in doing so, or any unique interpretations/approaches the company has undertaken in this production of the original text.

Design Technical: If design responses are done separately, more time will be given at that time to specific design concepts and technical execution. However, some time should be spent on design/technical elements in every critical response. Actors need to hear how a particular set, light, or costume design can worked for or against them in carrying out the author's intent or the director's concept. They need to hear how they can use a particular design/technical element to enhance character choices. Dealing with these elements is as much a part of the actor's as the director's job in the theatre. Some attention should be given to the manner in which the design

elements have revealed or masked the central dynamics of the play and/or the particular interpretation of it in this production.

Respondents should give some attention to how elements provided by designers have been well used or utterly ignored by other participants in the production, especially by actors or directors.

Discussions of the design/technical elements may take another ten to fifteen minutes of the hour response, depending on how much time was needed for the lead line and script sections and how many actors will need individual performance responses in the next part of the response.

Acting: When possible, actors should receive individual responses to their performance. If necessary, choruses, mobs, townsfolk, maids, supernumeraries, and other non-speaking, functional roles can be treated as a cluster or group, noting a few individual contributions but otherwise treating the common demands such roles make on actors and the contributions these particular actors have made to the production as a whole by their work on these roles.

It is critical that actors not be "re-directed" by respondents. That is not your job. The approach here might be to share one to two strengths the actor brings to the role, good choices he or she has made for the character, or elements of training that have helped communicate these choices in performance. This can be followed by one or two specific challenges to the actor regarding future growth or training in general in relation to this character, should the company have the luxury of taking the show back into rehearsal in the future.

Also remember that actors will hear the negative before they hear the positive about their performance. It is wise to begin with one or two statements about that actor's strengths, even if it is as simple a statement as *"You have enormous energy that reads quite well from the stage."* The more specific your good comments can be, the more valuable they will be. An example or two from the play is always helpful. I find actors cannot absorb more than about two acting challenges, nor do you have time in an hour response to give more than that to any individual actor. If your challenge targets one or two things in the actor's training or performance that can move the actor forward in his/her growth, your comments will be useful and give the actor confidence and encouragement. Specific re-interpretation of scenes or lines is generally counterproductive and may do more harm by confusing the actor or interfering with the work in progress in this production.

Time structure: A good length for a response session is one hour. This leaves about five minutes for the KCACTF identification; about five minutes to flesh out a lead line and be assured that the respondent has established some level of rapport with the company; about twenty minutes to deal with script, design, and technical elements, and about one half of the hour to deal with individual performances. This division of time will vary according to the nature of the play and the number of performers/designers/technicians to whom the respondent is speaking, but this is a rough time frame at which to aim.

5. RESPONDENTS NEED TO BE EFFECTIVE AT TAKING NOTES.

Do not be afraid of a blank page. If you work from a structure similar to the one described above, you simply have to wait until something emerges for you to note in each of the four areas of a response. I allow a maximum of one page of notes for general script and design/tech comments. Many respondents take a separate page of notes per actor/character group, noting one to two strengths and challenges and a few specific scene or line references as examples. Others record the sequence of dramatic plot points so they have an outline of the play's action to which they can refer as needed during the response. Whatever your approach, do not over note-take. You will become too detailed, lose the larger picture, and are in danger of taking director's rather than respondent's notes. The secret is to know that there is a structure to the response process and that you only need two to three points and examples for each section of the response.

6. SOME DO'S AND DON'TS

- **DON'T**—Move past the lead-line section until you have established some level of rapport with the company.
- **DO**—Stay current with theatrical developments, especially with material coming from other countries and/or cultures. There are new, acceptable forms emerging in the world of theatre that will find their way into college and university theatre seasons. It is not our job to eliminate them. We need to be sure that we are not, for example, imposing American realism on or rejecting performance art for academic theatre simply because we believe that particular form is or is not theatre. If you are not comfortable with certain kinds of material, ask that another respondent cover the production.
- **DON'T**—Alienate the director, designers, or actors.
- **DO**—Find *ways to say things positively and in* a supportive manner.
- **DO**—Take the company where they already are, praise what has been achieved and challenge them to move forward a step or two beyond that in pursuing their work as individual artists or as a company.
- **DON'T**—Leave the on-site faculty or staff discredited or with a mess to clean up. We are an educational outreach organization and we need to function accordingly.
- **DON'T**—Let a personal bias get in the way of a good response. If you have exceptionally strong prejudices for or against a particular play or type of theatre and cannot respond objectively, ask that another respondent be sent in your place. *"I hate musicals,"* is no way to begin a response to a production of *The Sound of Music*. And even if you don't say it, it may show.

Our job as respondents is to facilitate growth among theatre students and among our colleagues. We are there to praise work that has been successfully achieved. We are there to challenge where things could be better, to encourage work to be taken a next step towards excellence, to open new options, to reveal other ways of solving challenges we are given by many scripts and theatre forms.

We need to remain critically and personally open and receptive. We need to work out of a base of integrity and of respect for those to whom we respond and for the work that they do. Challenging each other to grow in these areas will assure continued excellence in regional adjudication and/or response.