

TENETS OF RESPONSES & PERFORMANCE CRITICISM TRAINING

by Ronald A. Willis, University of Kansas, August 11, 1980

Performance criticism is not the monolithic activity it may at first glance appear to be. Festival respondents, journalistic reviewers, scholarly critics, dramaturges, and theater educators all claim a part of the action. Yet their respective audiences, their communication means, their immediate objectives, and their formal approaches can all differ markedly. I would like here to consider the brand of performance criticism employed by the festival respondent: its general parameters, its intent, a projected scheme for its effective execution, and finally, some cues it provides for training our students who seek to become performance critics of any persuasion.

The festival respondent addresses as many as three different audiences. The first is the production team consisting of all those workers who contributed in any way to the theatrical event. Because festivals are broad educational activities, this audience includes not only the individuals responsible for the aesthetic artifact, but also those who engaged in the para-aesthetic activities that helped shape the overall event. The production team is thus a mixture of faculty and students, of performer and technician, of stage and front-of-house personnel.

The second audience is a sometime thing. When it exists, it includes members of the general audience who are allowed or encouraged to attend the public critique. Often they are themselves participants in the festival and are looking forward to (or backward on) the same kind of critique. This audience typically acts like a group eavesdropper merely listening in on the remarks directed primarily to the producing company.

The third audience is the committee, board or other agency responsible for some penultimate action affecting the festival participants. That action may be a ranking, an award, or an invitation to perform in the next level of the festival. This group may be composed of the respondents or it may be a separately constituted body. Typically it has not seen all (or maybe any) of the contending productions and so it depends on reports provided by the on-site respondents.

The festival respondent may offer both oral and written critiques. The production team usually receives an oral critique either immediately after the performance or sometime the next day. The director may also receive a written critique later which deals with issues not considered in the oral critique, many of them matters which came to mind only after a period of reflection. The general audience members and production team representatives may tape the oral critique for later reference. The remote selection agency may receive both oral and written reports that are often supplemented with slide presentations and give-and-take discussion.

Obviously particular circumstances dictate varying configurations of these specific procedures, but in any event a festival respondent inevitably faces multiple communication transactions whenever called upon to share critical reactions to a theatrical performance. However, unlike the journalistic reviewer or critic, the respondent does not address potential audience members with an eye to influencing their attendance at or understanding of a particular production.

Although each of the respondent's three audiences has a special interest in the performance critique, their informational needs and their perspectives differ considerably. The production team is looking for ways to improve its performance capabilities and for recognition for its accomplishments —although seldom in that order of importance. (In fact, the production team's emotional desire for positive reinforcement can lead to special communication difficulties.) But the overriding educational need of the production team, the need to identify effective theater principles and practices so as to be able to incorporate them into future performance, presents the respondent with a particularized critical challenge.

The members of the general audience look to the respondent for corroboration or modification of their own critical appraisals. Although they may be theater workers, the fact that they, like the respondent, have viewed the performance as spectators means that in this context they are consumers of theater rather than practitioners. Admittedly, the complex social/aesthetic nature of theater suggests that the line between consumer and practitioner (at least insofar as the idea of psychological participation is concerned) may have to be approached cautiously. However, the informational need to the general audience member is aptly characterized as how to best understand the dynamics of theater when approaching it as a spectator.

The festival selection agency looks to the respondent for detailed observations that will make its qualitative comparisons, rankings, and selections as equitable as possible. Naturally the overall appraisal offered by the respondent is important, but for that appraisal to be balanced against the one made by another respondent concerning a different production on a good deal of comprehensible and relevant supporting data is needed as well. Surely there can be no more frustrating committee activity than the endless shuffling of summary judgments that simply hang in space, unsupported by any data that can render them more understandable to people who did not see the productions.

An effective way of meeting the needs of all three audiences is to divide the critique into three parts.

1. The first part is a non-evaluative description of three things: the illusion or fictive world that was perceived, the theatrical means that created that fictive world, and the emotional and intellectual responses it prompted in the respondent.
2. The second part of the critique is the appraisal of what was perceived along with the full disclosure of the critical reasons for that appraisal.
3. The final part is advice articulated in terms of alternate possibilities that might profitably be considered and explored by the producing company.

Here we shall emphasize the descriptive section. For many reasons it is the most important portion of the respondent's response and it provides the most suggestive approach for performance criticism training.

The tone of the descriptive section, as indeed of the entire critique, is non-authoritarian. The respondent is not, after all, an adversary, but rather a fellow theater worker able to provide important and detailed feedback on the participants' work -- feedback that they seldom, if ever,

encounter under other auspices. The detailed and non-evaluative description lets them know just what illusion was perceived by at least one sensitive and articulate spectator. By comparing that perception with their intentions they can engage in rigorous self-appraisal, which, in the long run, is a primary obligation for any self-actuating theater artist. They can also size up the respondent. It is undoubtedly true that biases and theatre misperceptions operate in any theatrical communication.

A respondent ought to establish credibility as an observant spectator each time a critique is undertaken. Describing in detail the aesthetic object -which is aptly defined as the artwork as perceived by the willing spectator - makes clear precisely what it is that the respondent is going to appraise. It also keeps creative choice-making power in the hands of the practicing theater artists and does not cede it over to an outside authority. The non-evaluative nature of the description also keeps at least the early portion of the critique relatively free from the emotional static that so often accompanies appraisal sessions of any kind. The production team members are hopefully brought to the point of considering their work non-defensively and in a cool rather than an agitated state. By taking the time to establish clearly what was perceived, the respondent aligns him-or-herself with the work by assuming the role of the participating spectator thereby minimizing the adversary tension that so often exists between artists and critics.

Thus, for effective responses and, I maintain, for valuable training for all performance critics, focus on the detailed, three-tiered, non-evaluative descriptive report is extremely beneficial. It moves the attention of the respondent and the fledgling critic away from the rash assignment of worth that so often hampers their open experience of theatrical performance and colors their public behavior. Instead, their attention goes toward the lengthy and potentially more balanced consideration of their perception of the artwork and, indeed, of the total theatrical event. Since the entire process of doing theater is ultimately oriented toward creating an object that exists only for perception, such consideration allows everyone greater access to what is all too often a privately held but publicly attacked (or defended) belief as to what the fictive world perceived by the critic really was. Often, critics' perceptions do not correspond to the perceptions embraced by others, either consumers or practitioners. If we as educators are to take the desirable steps of promoting healthy self-awareness and developing more sophisticated tactics, we must first identify and then attempt to reconcile the variant perceptions that form the bases for all subsequent partisan critical alignments.

Of course, not all perceptions are equally valid or useful. Some derive more from personal pre-commitments and non-relevant emotional and intellectual baggage than they do from apt observation of what has transpired onstage. Some are more detailed and comprehensive than others. The act of describing what one believes he or she witnessed serves to sensitize that person to the possible contaminants of aesthetic perception.

One way we can train our students to become performance critics -- and more effective theater artists and audience members - is to engage them in the regular practice of describing . . .

- the nature of the fictive worlds they perceive;
- the theatrical materials and practices they believe made that fictive world apparent;
- and

- the sequence of thoughts and emotions that the perceived fictive world elicited in them.

Appraisals of the perceived performance need not agree. However, the critical bases for those appraisals are deserving of the same explication that characterized the descriptive section of the report. Again the rationale is simply that the act of articulating the premises upon which critical evaluations are made makes for good responses and for a healthy self-awareness in students who are formulating their critical positions. Respondents and critics like the rest of us, box themselves in more frequently with their unspoken assumptions than with any other intellectual error. Bringing these unspoken assumptions into light of day is the first step toward avoiding performance criticism malfunction.

The respondent offers advice to the production team in the form of alternate possibilities for particular decisions it has made. The purpose is to open up once again consideration of the process wherein choices were made that shaped the performance. A side benefit to this practice is the further explication of just what import the respondent attached to a particular performance element. The alternative offered need not, strictly speaking, be superior to the choice actually made in order for the production team members to profit from considering it. Any reflection that allows them to reappraise the choices they made makes them more aware of the process performances undergo in coming to life. For student critics, this advising procedure sensitizes them to the formative stages of theatrical production and makes them more perceptive observers. In short whatever the eventual specialization envisioned by our student performance critics, the procedure that informs good festival responses could be taken as a fruitful training model. A three-part response consisting of the tripartite descriptive report, a qualified appraisal, and a series of alternate possibilities offers a disciplined attack on the problems of both festival responses and performance criticism training.