

Writing a Review

There are two basic approaches to analyzing theatre—theoretical writing and reviewing. Theorists such as Aristotle or Zeami consider the general nature and purpose of theatre; reviewers offer opinions and assessments of specific productions. This article provides approaches and guidelines for writing theatre reviews.

A good theatre review does not merely summarize the plot of the play. A good review does several things. It provides the reader with any necessary—or interesting—background for understanding the play and its production: information about the playwright, the historical or cultural context of the play, previous important productions, media hype surrounding the play, and so on. It describes important details of the production—such as acting, direction, and staging—and how these factors contribute to the play's total impact. Additionally, a good review offers the reader an overall assessment of the performance experience from the insightful perspective of a seasoned theatregoer; therefore, reading plays and experiencing performances of all types is vital to gain the ability to give readers a sound and dependable review.

Collecting Data

Before attending a performance, become familiar with the play. If it's a published play, read it. If it's a new play by a well-known dramatist, read his or her earlier work, looking for common themes. If it's a new play by a new playwright, read any feature stories about or interviews with the playwright, the director, or the actors.

Note-taking

Take notes during the performance, or, since it's less distracting, between acts. Some critics simply write on the program; others carry a notebook—and more than one pen or pencil. The notes you take should include factual description—of actors' performances, the scenery, the costumes or lighting, the direction—as well as your personal and analytical response. Reviews combine both types of information.

Responding to a Production

Following are four approaches to responding to a performance. The first is a personal response; the other three are analytical or critical responses. You will probably want to combine elements from more than one of these approaches in developing your own reviewing strategy.

Personal Response

Reviewers are audience members first and critics second. Your first reactions will be personal responses to questions such as these:

- **Is the play interesting?** Does it capture your interest and hold it? What most interests you—the plot? characters? theme? dialogue? production (sets, props, lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup)?
- **Is the play convincing?** Do you accept what you see? Even if the play is not realistic, are you willing to make what the critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a “willing suspension of disbelief”? That is, you know you are watching a play, not reality, but you agree to be convinced by what you see.
- **Is the play moving?** Do you feel something or respond to something? Do you laugh? cry? sympathize with the characters or their situation? feel the suspense or mystery?
- **Is the play stimulating?** Does it give you something to think about? Does it give you new ideas? make a point you hadn't considered? give a new insight into some part of life?

Once you respond to these four questions, you are ready to shift from reacting personally to thinking critically as you analyze why the play worked or did not work for you. Although readers may be interested in your personal responses, they generally expect—and respect—a more objective critical approach. The next three approaches provide different methods of analyzing a play. Once again, you may want to combine elements from each of them in developing your own critical strategies.

The Playwright's Purpose

Considering the following three questions is a simple but useful approach in analyzing a play:

- What is the playwright trying to do?
- How well has he or she done it?
- Is it worth doing?

Dramatic Elements

Another way to analyze what you saw, heard, and understood is to consider the basic elements of a production. Notes on each element will provide details to support your opinions.

- **Plot** Does the exposition provide sufficient background information? Are the events of the play causally linked? If not, is the lack of causality an important element in the plot? What conflict does the plot reveal? Does the plot move to a climax? Is the ending inevitable?
- **Character** Who are the major and minor characters? What are their relationships? Which roles are particularly well-acted—and how?

- **Setting** Where does the action of the play occur? Are there multiple settings? What impact does the setting have on plot? character? theme?
- **Theme** What insights into human beings or the human condition has the playwright given you?
- **Style** What is the overall style of the play? Is it light or serious? realistic or fantastic?
- **Language** Is the playwright's language realistic or poetic? Is the dialogue appropriate to the characters? to the situation?
- **Production** Do the scenery, lighting, sound, costumes, and makeup reinforce the impact of the other elements of the play? Do they overwhelm them?
- **Music/Dance** (if relevant) Do music and/or dance advance the plot, reveal character, convey meaning?

The Play's Effect

Asking yourself the following questions is a way of extending your analysis of the play:

- **What does this performance do for me?** Does it tell me something about being a human being, about people's motivations, behavior, fears, desires, relationships?
- **What does this performance do for the community?** Does it enable me to recognize social injustice or political corruption, or to encourage me to think about how to solve such problems?
- **What does this performance do for the theatre?** Does the performance provide playwrights and directors with new ways to write or stage drama?
- **What does this performance do simply as entertainment?** Does the experience satisfy those in the audience basically looking for diversion?

Writing the Review

When you have collected your data, and applied whatever approach (or approaches) you have decided to take in responding to the performance, it's time to write the review.

Being Fair

Before writing, try to separate your own feelings from your assessment of the play; for example, don't blame the playwright or the performers if they presented tragedy and you were in the mood for comedy. Second, distinguish responsibilities: don't blame the actors for the words they say; don't blame the playwright for inappropriate costumes or confusing scenery. Third, don't demand that all shows

be alike; that is, don't expect one company's production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to be the same as that of another company. Finally, compare the quality of work to that of other productions you have seen. The more shows you see, the more valid your comparisons will be.

Some professional reviewers are famous (or notorious) for the harshness of their reviews. They delight in calling attention to the defects, to the lack of perfection in a performance. You may find the style of such reviews amusing, but the director, actors, and general public rarely find this approach helpful. Before simply announcing that a production is bad, try to answer questions such as these: What is it that the people who created it are trying to say to me? What are they doing for me? What are they showing me? Try to be as open to what you have experienced and as objective and accurate in your description of it as possible. If you still think that the play is bad, carefully detail why it is bad.

Structuring a Review

A good review conveys the background, description of the production, and overall assessment of the performance experience through the careful presentation of facts and opinions supported by details and examples. Below is one way to structure a review.

FIRST PARAGRAPH A journalistic reviewer is both a journalist and a reviewer. As a journalist, remember that the **lead**, or opening, of the review should include answers to the five W's, journalism's five essential questions: Who? (the playwright, director, actors), What? (the play), Where? (the name of the theatre), When? (performance dates or times), and Why? (general assessment of the play's purpose and/or worth).

Newspaper reviews often convey this information in a box adjoining the review; sometimes it begins, or heads, the review. If so, you might instead begin your review by giving your opinion of one element of the performance.

SECOND PARAGRAPH If the play is new, briefly summarize the action and touch on the major themes of the play; if the author is well known, you might compare the plot or themes of the present play to those in the author's previous works.

SUCCEEDING PARAGRAPHS Discuss the acting, always identifying the character being portrayed and that character's purpose in the play. Examine any technical aspects of the production, especially as they reinforce or further the production's effectiveness. Comment on the stage direction or, if it is a musical play, the choreography. In the final paragraph, state or restate your general opinion.