

The death (and life) of American theater criticism: Advice to the young critic.

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The Death (and Life) of American Theater Criticism: Advice to the Young Critic

Jonathan Kalb

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The Death (and Life) of American Theater Criticism:
Advice to the Young Critic

A Lecture to Students at Barnard College and New York University, Fall 2002

Theater criticism is an art (some might call it a vice) I have practiced for twenty-two years. University lectures on theater criticism aren't common, in my experience, partly because the subject falls into the crevices between edgily linked disciplines—literary studies and theater practice, scholarship and journalism, art and entertainment. There are also more practical reasons. Theater programs are partial to visits by working playwrights, actors, directors, and designers, which makes sense as they are practitioners of flourishing professions. They can be displayed as evidence of the golden future awaiting the best theater graduates. In the same circumstances I have to be more circumspect; I can describe successes to you, but if I'm not to distort the truth, I must also report my discomfort that my art is in danger of extinction.

Please don't worry, I'm not planning to whine. I'm aware that the extreme circumstances as I see them sometimes do have a fertilizing effect, just as dung dropped in a trampled pasture occasionally nurtures tufts of new green grass. I address myself today especially to the tougher tufts among you, to offer the benefit of whatever survivalist wisdom I might have. The fact is, though, there is no way to describe the promise, the opportunity, the necessity, or the dignity of the critical act at the current moment without first explaining, and maybe even attempting to alarm you about, the forces arrayed against it.

I consider myself fortunate. I've had real, sometimes enviable opportunities. After several unhappy years as a pre-med, I began writing theater criticism, with no competition, in my college newspaper, the *Wesleyan Argus*—right after seeing Walter Asmus's astonishing production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, which changed my life more than I knew then because it planted the seed of **[End Page 44]** my first book. Later, after graduation, I reviewed for the local newspaper in my college town, the *Middletown Press*, also a formative experience. At the time—1981—I considered myself a playwright, and I imagined that writing reviews might help me figure out what was wrong with my plays.

What I discovered instead was a fascination with criticism itself; the way my mind worked was better suited to the art of criticism than to playwriting. I don't mind admitting that what most spurred me to begin with, like many others, was the excitement of having my twenty-one-year-old opinion appreciated at long last by a public other than my mother. The editor of the *Middletown Press* soon disabused me on this point. After reading one pan I wrote of a production at the Long Wharf Theatre, he called me into his office to complain, without an iota of irony or hesitation, that my judgment had differed too much from that of the *New York Times*. "It's just ... it's just too DIFFERENT," he told me, "your review, it's just too different from what THEY said, and I'm uncomfortable with that."

From the *Middletown Press* I went on to write for many other publications, including, for about ten years, the *Village Voice*. But my luckiest (albeit tainted) chance came much later, in 1997, when I fell into what felt like a time warp. After a decade of college teaching, during which I devoted less and less energy to journalism and more and more to books and longer articles and essays about theater, I became the main theater critic for *New York Press*—a free weekly rag-if-the-re-ever-was-one that sees itself as the *Voice*'s chief competition. There, for four theater seasons, I enjoyed working conditions that were to my knowledge unique in the United States: complete freedom to see and say what I wanted, practically zero space pressure (my column was 1,200...

JONATHAN KALB

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