

DRAMA HAS ISSUES:  
A BRIEF RETROSPECTIVE ON THE AMERICAN THEATRE  
CRITIC IN NEW YORK FROM 1925 TO PRESENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

Theatre criticism has evolved with the advancement of technology and the decline of print journalism. As consumers are given increasing agency by which they can filter the news and reporting they read and occasionally replace it with their own, the idea that a sole voice on a certain topic brandishes more dominance over it than the masses of people involved in its creation and sustainment becomes progressively absurd. Conversely, however, readers rely on theatre critics to make theatergoing decisions for them explicitly because critics are supposed experts on the subject and their opinions are to be respected and observed accordingly. This dichotomy is baffling, but it exists in flux of communication and information that continues to grow as social media develops and becomes ubiquitous.

From 1925 onward, Brooks Atkinson, Walter Kerr, Frank Rich, and Ben Brantley have inhabited the same position of chief theatre critic of *The New York Times* for almost ninety years collectively, yet each critic served very different purposes for their readerships. The prestige that exists around their role did not change over time, but prominence of their publication in popular culture and the utilization and connotation of their criticism did change. The trend is also apparent in the criticism that appears in *The New Yorker*, particularly because the criticism was not originally consumed for its evaluative and scholarly properties but for its entertainment and cultural magnitudes. The American theatre critic will continue to forge its own prominence in the boundless landscape of the potential of modern technology as it progresses, but ultimately, people will buy tickets, the audience will fill the house, and the show will go on.

## **DEDICATION**

To my friend Trevin Cooper,  
whose noble scholarship and generosity  
has inspired countless individuals  
in their pursuit of curiosity and progress,  
myself included.

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## INTRODUCTION

Criticism as a genre of formal writing is shrouded in the fight for an elusive stamp of validity, any indicator that the author's writing and judgment speaks with an authority that exceeds the knowledge and prowess of the everyman. Critics mark their success with the extent of their own exaltation. This ideology is inherently exclusive, yet the critic cannot exist without a readership that sympathizes with his or her sentiments and perspectives. The writing of a critic can only survive when its readership finds value and benefit in the critic's thoughts, but if the readers are not included in the conversation and are merely parishioners to a critic's *au courant* homily, what inclines them to eagerly pry open each new edition of their daily paper or feverishly scroll through breaking news on their phones during their morning commute? Faith, in the publication and in the trustworthy tradition of the form, is the operative encouragement for the majority of the readership. Paired with the convenience of routine, critics have an implicit audience eagerly awaiting each review, even if those readers have never read a word from the authors in question. The publications for which critics write possess a cachet that can be manipulated for any occasion, which leaves them with a choice: to proactively influence and inform a greater public or to become comfortably complacent in the publication's intrinsic stability.

Where print journalism was once considered a daily primer of current events, including arts and culture, it is now a vast smorgasbord from which consumers can binge on one section and completely ignore others. There is nothing inherently reprehensible with choosing to read

only what is of personal interest, but it does change the way the public interacts with a publication. During a time when a substantial number of newspapers were read from cover to cover, each section had a comparable audience; over time, it has evolved into a different kind of reading experience. Unless an article sits directly below a masthead in bold print or appears as a notification on their phones, articles must often be located by readers with specific intent in order to be read. For theatre critics, it entails that the people reading their reviews have searched for their unequivocal opinions, but it also implies that few people will consider their work outside the limited theatre community. Therefore, contemporary criticism near the end of the twentieth century and onwards contrasts the criticism written during the early twentieth century because it must reflect the fleeting relationship between reader and publication.

Critics whose platforms abide in other literary and academic realms suffer from a similar dichotomy, but the relationship between the critic and the reader differs. In capturing theatre history, historians like dramatic completist Ethan Mordden and musical theatre specialist Steven Suskin unwittingly take on the role of critic when discussing productions and performances from decades past because of the inevitable bias that is apparent in anecdotally driven literature. The practicality of these nostalgic representations of criticism to the reader often lies in the administered perspective on performances he or she would never have the opportunity to experience otherwise. With the permission of first-hand accounts, informed objectivity, and thorough contextualization, the reader is given self-aggrandizing agency by which he or she can form opinions and become informed. Theatre history attracts an audience that is already invested in the genre so, similar to journalism, there is an aspect of



entertainment to this kind of criticism in addition to its function as a text of reference.

However, entertainment is not closely tied to academic criticism. Academia is established around the concept of developing the expertise of the reader, indicating that writers of academic criticism are assumed to be experts in their respective fields of study. Whether or not that is the case in actuality, academic criticism is reserved for the classroom rather than simply an interested public. The niche market for this kind of writing is ideally a conservatory of the next generation of great theatre scholars, but due to both the dwindling amount of these ambitious students and those who teach them, the magnitude of opinion and context in criticism can be particularly insular in that it is only pertinent to those studying it. Theatre is a community-based form of art; isolating the study of it also stifles its growth. This kind of criticism is not composed with the general public in mind, but there is hope that the gravitas of academic theatre criticism will be synthesized by other scholars into a more palatable form for those theatre enthusiasts without advanced degrees in the subject but in possession of a keen mind and great passion for the art.

## NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICISM

### *Theatre Journalism in New York*

The definitive voice of theatre in the United States exists in New York City. It is the epicenter of a remarkable convergence of education, heritage, and opportunity. Regional and local theatre is crucial to the survival of the form, but New York dictates how it lives and what it will become. Theatre critics in New York not only provide expertise to determine what theatre should be but also how it will be recorded and perceived in the future. As a reader, whether one subscribes to the beliefs of *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker* (or, surreptitiously, to *The New York Post*), the faith one has in the institution itself is often greater than the scripture they are given, similar to the loyalty that exists between academics and their preferred theatre historians and scholars. Readers begin to align their own philosophical identities with that of their favorite authors, which is disconcerting considering that criticism is predominantly subjective. Criticism should not be consumed as a linear stream of impressions from a single source but rather a network of learned assessment and theory from which personal conclusions can be drawn. The manner in which the audience engages with criticism dictates its influence in the public conscience. Journalism, in comparison to literature and academic writing, can be easily devoured in relatively short moments of time; the reader is more inclined to incorporate it into their daily routine. The curation of one's own subscriptions takes considerable effort, weighing cost against quality of content and frequency of editions, unless the publication maintains an illustrious prominence that nullifies the need for guesswork.

### *Theatre Critics at The New York Times*

*The New York Times'* reputation for intelligent, sophisticated journalism consistently eclipses every other publication in its category. The *Times'* name alone is its own seal of approval, and the writing that appears in it is given the same acclaim, whether it deserves the distinction or not. The prestige is also assigned to the theatre criticism published in the *Times*. To its readership, *The New York Times* is a badge of highbrow refinement, especially concerning theatre. After a notable production opens in the city, the first question often asked is, "What did the *Times* critic think?" The *Times* during this moment of hesitant intrigue is usually referring to the chief drama critic of the newspaper.

The chief theatre critic of *The New York Times* is the paragon of theatre criticism in New York, and whether one personally agrees with his views or not, the reality of the matter is that the preponderance of subscribers to the *Times* considers the opinions of the chief theatre critic as absolute. The *Times* chief theatre critic could sell out a show after a positive review or close it overnight with a negative one. Although that power has waned with the decline of print journalism in the United States, the emphasis on *The New York Times Critics' Picks* still has the power to make hasty theatregoing decisions for the consumer. One glance at the conspicuous gold imprimatur at the top of a review or the show's advertisement on the side of a bus, and readers can (and often do) stop there before heading to the TKTS discount ticket line for 60% off their mezzanine seats for the matinee. This kind of microcriticism, established on the potentially misleading culture surrounding marquee pull quotes and tweet-driven marketing,

does answer the eternal question of theatre criticism, “Should I see this show?” However, it cannot explain why.

Since 1925, most chief theatre critics of *The New York Times* have endured for decades at a time in order to provide their readership with the explanation, each given the opportunity to see considerable growth and change in the New York theatre landscape in tandem with the evolution of the country itself. There are four names on the *Times* theatre roster from 1925 to the present that fall into this category: Brooks Atkinson, Walter Kerr, Frank Rich, and Ben Brantley. The evolution of theatre criticism (as well as the way the general public consumes print journalism) is reflected in the timeline of their work. For example, the aspects of the drama and design that are crucial to Kerr are footnotes in the reviews of Rich, and the unceremonious way in which Atkinson handles celebrity would never be found in Brantley’s calculated, tabloid-conscious writing. With disjunctions like these between transitioning drama critics of the *Times*, the public cognizance of theatre also changes.

**Brooks Atkinson.** Brooks Atkinson began his tenure as chief theatre critic of *The New York Times* in 1925 and remained at his post until 1960, with brief stints as a war correspondent in China during World War II and as a press correspondent in Russia, for which he won the 1947 Pulitzer Prize for Correspondence. Atkinson covered both Broadway and off-Broadway productions extensively, a convention that did not persist with later drama critics of the *Times*. His criticism is concise and specific; he does not concern himself with contextualizing the works at hand for his readers, assuming that the reader already has some familiarity with the

playwright, the cast, past productions, etc. Atkinson also circumvents explaining the plot to the reader. Rather than being a reference for the consumer on the who, the what, the where, and the when of the production, Atkinson focuses on the why. He creates an environment for readers to draw their own conclusions from his words rather than provide them with an encyclopedic account of the show in question. In his review of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Allegro* in 1947, Atkinson takes the reader through his own experience of the musical, going as far as stating, "If the first half of 'Allegro' were not so overwhelming, the commonplaceness of the second act would hardly be worth noting. Perhaps it is only commonplace by comparison."<sup>1</sup> He continues, however, to explore that sentiment by expressing, in spite of the middling second act, "All the elements of theatre are so perfectly blended that the music and the ballet are interwoven into one singing pattern of narrative; and here 'Allegro' is torn out of the folk life of America."<sup>2</sup> Atkinson is not afraid to guide the reader through the personable contradictions of his own contemplation. He is clearly considerate with his language and unafraid of giving distinct praise, which is a surprising rarity among theatre critics. His style is conversational yet refuses to pander to the audience; he knows what will attract the readers' eyes on the page and how to retain them once they have settled into a familiar realm of cultural understanding. His review of the original Broadway production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 lures readers with the celebrity of Bert Lahr, predominantly known for his iconic turn in the 1939 film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, and sustains them with the following lofty prospects of Samuel Beckett's play, "...an attitude towards man's experience on

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<sup>1</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "The New Play in Review: Allegro," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1947, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

earth; the pathos, cruelty, comradeship, hope, corruption, filthiness and wonder of human existence.”<sup>3</sup> It is a description befitting any Shakespearean tragedy, introduced by the charisma and nostalgia of a comic lion.

**Walter Kerr.** Walter Kerr emerged as chief theatre critic at *The New York Times* in 1966, barely six years after Atkinson’s retirement from the paper. Observing the sheer volume of his reviews reveals an unmistakable style shift in the theatre criticism of the *Times*. Where Atkinson found economy in his writing, Kerr reveled in indulgence. His reviews are loquacious in comparison and supplemented by previously unseen production photos. Unlike Atkinson’s straightforward, playwright-play headline format, Kerr chooses to utilize wordplay that entices and startles the reader at first glance. A headline like “Is That Why Will Wrote ‘All the World’s a Stage’?”<sup>4</sup> is deceptively layered. The question is immediately captivating by nature; the quote is a common idiom unanimously credited to Shakespeare. Those conditions would be enough to convince the reader that the review concerns a Shakespearean play and its interpretation in relation to the rest of his canon, but if Bard-inclined readers see it, they can also accurately glean that it is a review of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Crafting a clever headline may seem like a trite gesture, but it is part of why Kerr’s criticism works. He invites the reader to command their own breadth of context to any given review and identify with the conversation and not his opinion alone. Similar to Atkinson, Kerr takes the time to form his argument in front of the audience. In his review entitled “Is ‘Sweeney’ on Target?” Kerr mulls over the nature of Stephen

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<sup>3</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot'; Mystery Wrapped in Enigma at Golden The Cast," *The New York Times*, April 20, 1956, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Kerr, "Is That Why Will Wrote ‘All the World’s a Stage’?," *The New York Times*, July 8, 1973, 87.

Sondheim's score and whether or not it is compositionally similar to opera and how it operates.

He writes,

The Stephen Sondheim music is prettier than usual. Strictly speaking, Mr. Sondheim does not write 'pretty' tunes, and when he is carrying the burden of the narrative here—with so much near-recitative—he edges close enough to opera to make you wish he'd gone the whole way. Whence the unusually large amount of lilting melody then? It stems in part, I think, from the need to accommodate both a turn in the plotting and requirements of the blissfully mindless co-conspirator Angela Lansbury plays.<sup>5</sup>

Kerr ruminates over what the score is and is not and presents his reasoning for its purpose in the context of the musical. He asks the questions he presents rather than using them as rhetorical devices for his own agenda. The implication that the readers' answers are as crucial as his own validates their voice in the conversation. The practice continues with the *Times'* succeeding long-term theatre critic, Frank Rich.

**Frank Rich.** Nine years after graduating Harvard, with brief stints at the *New York Post* and *Time* as a film critic, Rich commenced his thirteen-year career as chief theatre critic of *The New York Times* in 1980. Retiring from the position in 1993, Rich continued at the paper as an op-ed columnist and senior writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. In 2011, Rich began writing for *New York* magazine as a Writer-at-Large, focusing on politics and culture. His foray into editorializing current events is unsurprising, considering his writing about culture, notably theatre, reads like an opinion column. Rich's criticism is less about critiquing the work as it applies to the theatre macrocosm and more about how it relates to the world of Frank Rich.

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Kerr, "Is 'Sweeney' on Target?," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1979, 147.

Emphasizing the singular voice of the critic in a review is imperative to its purpose. If readers remain aware that the chief theatre critic of the *Times* is both an important voice in the assessment of New York theatre and a sole voice on the topic, they are able to contextualize their own opinions and determine their courses of action accordingly. Rich utilizes the first-person narrative in his reviews to foster a sense of inclusion but conversely uses second-person narrative to punctuate his arguments by necessitating the Other. He exploits the intimate relationship repeatedly established through first-person “we” in order to transform it into a caustic “you” when manifesting his dominance as Critic. At the beginning of his review of the original Broadway production of Tony Kushner’s *Millennium Approaches*, Rich is ostentatious enough to wield his authority by saying, “This play has already been talked about so much that you may feel you have already seen it, but believe me, you haven’t, even if you actually have.”<sup>6</sup> Withal, Rich ends the review with sentimental patriotism by proclaiming, “He sends his haunting messenger, a spindly, abandoned gay man with a heroic spirit and a ravaged body, deep into the audience’s heart to ask just who we are and just what, as the plague continues and the millennium approaches, we intend this country to become.”<sup>7</sup> This narrative exchange illustrates a dynamic that Rich constituted as chief theatre critic to forge a communal theatre experience for his readers as well as induct himself as their pansophical theatre guide.

The theatre community simultaneously feared and revered the work of Frank Rich.

Nicknamed the “Butcher of Broadway,” Rich is the last of the chief theatre critics at *The New*

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Rich, “Review/Theater: Angels in America; Millennium Approaches; Embracing All Possibilities in Art and Life,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



*York Times* whose reviews could drastically determine the success or failure of a show, often truncating the production's anticipated run by driving patrons, his readers and devotees, away from the theatre. Infamously, the Broadway musical *Carrie* closed at the Virginia Theatre on 15 May 1988, three days and five performances after opening night. Although not the only critic who gave *Carrie* a scathing review (despite its well-attended preview period), Rich led the critical movement that negated all hope for the musical's longevity.

Rich's reviews, like Kerr's, are characteristically long, but for *Carrie*, his criticism is mordantly concise. He states, "But why would the kids perform an exuberant number titled 'Out for Blood' - leaping over the trough under flashing red disco lights - while carrying out the butchery? Presumably there are still some mysteries that mankind is not meant to unravel."<sup>8</sup> In the span of a single thought, he succinctly manages to discount the score, book, and design and persists, saying, "Were the rest of the evening as consistent in its uninhibited tastelessness, 'Carrie' would be a camp masterpiece - a big-budget excursion into the Theater of the Ridiculous."<sup>9</sup> This statement implies the musical did not deliver in that respect, and Rich spends the rest of his review explaining why in a few short paragraphs. When Rich sees potential in a piece of theatre, even if he dislikes it, he devotes time to generating discourse surrounding its political, social, and historical implications and significance. *Carrie* was not worth that investment.

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<sup>8</sup> Frank Rich, "Review/Theater; The Telekinetic 'Carrie,' With Music," *The New York Times*, May 13, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

During his term at *The New York Times*, Rich dared to position theatre criticism on the same plane as world news with reviews that not only return responsibility for action to the readers themselves but also reaffirm their significance as affecting parts of an outstanding whole. While Rich believed his readers to be astute and responsible for their role in cultural cultivation, he often exercised his authority with the knowledge that his criticism affected the theatre landscape during his tenure.

**Ben Brantley.** While Frank Rich relinquished his theatre beat altogether in 1993, Ben Brantley joined *The New York Times* as a staff drama critic, eventually inhabiting the chief drama critic office in 1996. Before enlisting with the *Times*, Brantley worked primarily for beauty and entertainment magazines, including *Vanity Fair*, *Women's Wear Daily*, and *Elle*, as a writer and editor. Where Frank Rich's penchant for politics and objectivism was apparent in his writing, Brantley's background in fashion and popular culture is reflected in his criticism. While, journalism concerning entertainment and fashion is not inferior to "hard" journalism concerning foreign affairs and economics, each objective requires a unique approach and set of priorities for the reader. In entertainment journalism, there is a sense of desiring to know the topic rather than being required to know it, and Brantley highlights that desire in his reviews. In a statement made by Brantley for his *Times Topics* page, he states, "Theater criticism should be visceral, at least on some level, an articulation of that fierceness and passion."<sup>10</sup> Brantley achieves this by enticing the reader with tantalizing yet underwhelming overtures that would not be out of place in a tabloid. He opens his review of the 1996 Broadway revival of John

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Brantley, "Ben Brantley," *Times Topics*, September 8, 2008.

Kander and Fred Ebb's *Chicago* by proclaiming, "Who would have thought there could be such bliss in being played for a patsy? In the pulse-racing revival of the musical 'Chicago,' which opened last night at the Richard Rodgers Theater, all the world's a con game, and show business is the biggest scam of all."<sup>11</sup> He continues the frivolity by saying, "The America portrayed onstage may be a vision of hell, but the way it's being presented flies us right into musical heaven."<sup>12</sup> The illustrative analogy of heaven and hell is a rudimentary convention, but it is an attempt to lighten the criticism fare for the consumer, even if that behavior is perceived as condescending pandering. Brantley also believes in critic as informer. In his 2008 statement, Brantley expresses, "It's part of a reviewer's responsibility to provide context and background and back story, all the intellectual stuff."<sup>13</sup> For the first time in the twentieth century, the plot and reference information becomes a consciously central point to theatre criticism by a long-term chief drama critic of the *Times*. Atkinson avoided it altogether. Both Kerr and Rich addressed key moments in a production in order to assess specific performances or design elements but did not invest in linear storytelling like Brantley. In Brantley's review of the 2015 Broadway production of the Alison Bechdel-conceived, autobiographical musical *Fun Home*, he spends the entire review recounting the plot, reducing his "criticism" of the cast and creative team to embellished parentheticals like, "(a spot-on Roberta Colindrez)," and "(John Clancy did the nuanced orchestrations.)"<sup>14</sup> One can assume that Brantley spent an entire paragraph on Michael Cerveris's performance as the featured role of Bechdel's father, Bruce, because it was

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<sup>11</sup> Ben Brantley, "A Lively Legacy, A Come-Hither Air," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ben Brantley, "Ben Brantley," *Times Topics*.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Brantley, "Review: 'Fun Home' at the Circle in the Square Theater," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2015.

truly the outstanding performance of the evening or, more likely, because of Cerveris's lauded reputation in the theatre community and his well-anticipated return to Broadway after departing the 2012 revival of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita* more than two years prior. Brantley's fascination with celebrity is a through-line in his history as a critic and magazine reporter. Brantley opens his review of the Broadway transfer of Peter Morgan's play *The Audience* with three paragraphs about Helen Mirren's film accolades, the thrilling idea of confabulating with Queen Elizabeth II, and the bargain of getting Celebrity Helen Mirren and Virtual Queen of England for the price of one costly ticket.<sup>15</sup> Brantley's reviews exemplify how criticism has evolved to fit the trends of an early-twenty-first century consumer of journalism. As newspapers are reduced to an aggregate of statistics and blurbs, the criticism follows suit. A considerable passel of theatregoers now read *The New York Times* theatre section to assess cast lists, estimate ticket prices, and skim one-sentence summaries of shows rather than to read how the theatre community is laboriously sustaining itself each precarious season with ill-conceived yet celebrity-studded revivals and conglomerate-driven musical adaptations for consumers choosing the nostalgic and familiar over progressive innovations.

**Charles Isherwood.** Charles Isherwood is not a chief theatre critic of *The New York Times*. He is, however, an integral part of the unspoken hierarchy within a theatre beat at any major publication, particularly in New York. The senior drama critic covers Broadway productions and high-profile productions in the city, regionally, and occasionally in the West End. Another critic, such as Isherwood, is perched directly beneath, assigned performances at

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<sup>15</sup> Ben Brantley, "Review: Helen Mirren Stars in 'The Audience' on Broadway," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2015.

major off-Broadway venues and the rare Broadway opening in the senior drama critic's absence. All other staff critics work underneath them, typically covering off-off-Broadway venues and miscellaneous performances around the city and its outer boroughs. When Brooks Atkinson wrote for the *Times*, he himself covered both Broadway and off-Broadway productions as part of his customary assignment. Walter Kerr followed suit. The Arts and Leisure section expanded as off-Broadway and not-for-profit theatre in the city grew exponentially in the late 1950s and 1960s, so when Frank Rich took over when Kerr retired in 1980, he could not feasibly cover everything by himself. A shift occurred in what is considered the responsibility of the senior drama critic and what is passed to a staff critic, strategically separating productions by venue and vogue. To describe this designated staff critic as second-string is reductive, but due to the nature of the tiered system and the inherent bias towards Broadway and commercial theatre, the position remains unsung. The magnitude and star quality of two productions may be matched, but if one is playing on Broadway and the other is being performed off-Broadway, a general audience will immediately categorize the Broadway show as superior, regardless of its content and artistic value. This judgment is made before the reader takes the writers' work or ideologies into account, creating an inherent bias based in title and type of theatre beat alone.

While Brantley covers the Broadway circuit and high-profile productions, his counterpart in Charles Isherwood focuses on off-Broadway productions and smaller venues in New York and its surrounding areas. Isherwood started his theatre criticism career writing for a small theatre periodical in Los Angeles before becoming a staff writer for *Variety* in 1993. In

1998, he became the primary theatre critic at the magazine which required his skills as a journalist and editor to expand beyond the performance realm of Southern California to the New York theatre scene and prominent regional theatres across the United States. Isherwood left *Variety* to join the theatre staff of *The New York Times* in 2004.

Isherwood is Brantley's foil at *The New York Times*. Where Brantley's criticism is impassioned and self-conscious, Isherwood chooses to write in a style much like Atkinson and Kerr: uninterested in being encyclopedic yet invested in timely analysis of both content and performance. However, Isherwood's writing is less personal than the critics who came before him. In both his reviews from *Variety* and his more recent writing in the *Times*, Isherwood uses first-person narrative sparingly, providing his readers with a more academic tone rather than conversational, and uses it to punctuate his arguments instead, much like Rich. In Isherwood's review of Andrew Lippa's off-Broadway opening of *The Wild Party* in 2000, he writes,

The composer isn't going to face the accusations of artiness that have sometimes been leveled at young composers fighting for a foothold in today's musical theater (see Ricky Ian Gordon, Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa, author of the second "Wild Party"). His music is very accessible indeed. But that's the problem — it's accessible because you feel you've heard it all before. Lippa's two and a half hours of music boasts little of real distinction or originality.<sup>16</sup>

Isherwood's use of "you" when reflecting upon Lippa's work focuses on a general "you" that may or may not include himself and every member of his readership. It is a term of

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Isherwood, "Review: 'The Wild Party'," *Variety*, February 27, 2000.

familiarization that manages to function as a boundary between the reader and the material rather than between reader and critic.

The dichotomy between Brantley and Isherwood's styles of criticism at the *Times* becomes less recognizable as their long-standing administration persists. The nature of the theatre section at the paper has evolved into something less revelatory and more referential. Isherwood's resistance against base recapitulation has weakened. Dissimilar to his previous *Wild Party* write-up, in his *Times* review of Anthony Giardina's *The City of Conversation* at Lincoln Center's Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre, Isherwood spends all but a few paragraphs working through the plot with only occasional interjections of performance commentary. In the remaining paragraphs free from story and character study, however, Isherwood concerns himself with the resonance of the play on a sociopolitical scale, divergent from Brantley's informational criticism mentality. He writes,

Like her political foes, Hester eventually comes to develop of a stony intransigence when it comes to her principles. The macrocosmic result, Mr. Giardina suggests, is the state of the nation today, with both sides of the political divide in conversation with only their own constituencies, and a wide gulf separating them. By taking us into the living room of a well-connected Washington clan, Mr. Giardina's stimulating play illuminates the emotional toll that living in such a house divided (and a country divided) can take on its inhabitants.<sup>17</sup>

Although pressed to serve an audience that reduces his criticism to a list of names and collection of plot points, Charles Isherwood insists that his readers synthesize those facts into thoughts, even if they are different from his own.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Isherwood, "A House, and Family, Divided, 'City of Conversation' Charts a Sea Change in Washington," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2014.

### *Drama Critics at The New Yorker*

The only other New York publication that rivals the reputation of *The New York Times* in both deference and notoriety is *The New Yorker*. Each publication distinctively symbolizes New York journalism not only because one is a newspaper and the other is a magazine, respectively, but also because the writing published in each periodical is written for unique consumption by their audiences. Although both periodicals cover the same array of topics, where the *Times'* is a colossal accumulation of local, domestic, and world news in the forms of articles, reports, and surveys, *The New Yorker* is a carefully crafted collection of long-form pieces interspersed with a limited compilation of local listings of art, music, dance, and theatre and the occasional iconic cartoon. In a weekly publication rather than a daily, authors whose works appear in *The New Yorker* have a greater chance of withstanding the surge of news that is in constant motion in cosmopolitan journalism. The magazine regularly highlights works of fiction and poetry in addition to its reporting, commentary, and criticism, but they are not perceived as unusually juxtaposed because the selection of writing published in *The New Yorker* is tailored to a literary-minded, cultured audience. Therefore, theatre content found in *The New Yorker* follows suit. Like *The New York Times*, the magazine's drama critics are typically separated into Broadway and off-Broadway beats, with the senior drama critic covering Broadway openings and high-profile off-Broadway productions. The remaining, second-string staff critics write about everything else. Focusing on writers Edith Oliver, John Lahr, and Hilton Als, whose careers at the magazine have spanned from 1947 to the present, one is able to analyze how the form has dictated the content of theatre criticism in *The New Yorker*.



**Edith Oliver.** Edith Oliver began her career at *The New Yorker* in 1947 as a nonfiction editor and reader but refused any writing assignments, despite submitting anonymous book reviews. She was officially hired to the magazine's staff in 1961 as a film critic, a position she inhabited for five years before starting her three-decade run as one of the magazine's primary theatre critics. With Brendan Gill covering Broadway, Oliver's criticism championed Off-Broadway works, albeit writing about Broadway productions as well, and was an enthusiastic supporter of black theatre of the 1960s and 1970s, including the New Federal Theatre, and new works by ambitious, young playwrights. Oliver's writing itself matured during her decades at the magazine, exuding confidence in exceeding concision. Like Kerr, her tone is conversational, but she takes strides to make her arguments about the works at hand approachable to the uninformed reader with the use of colloquialisms, informal speech, and affectations in text presentation. In her 1964 review of Mike Nichols' off-Broadway production of Ann Jellicoe's *The Knack*, Oliver states,

Even though I had a pretty good time, I must say that "The Knack" doesn't entirely come off, perhaps because the wonderfully ingenious Mike Nichols has directed the play as a farce when one suspects that Miss Jellicoe didn't mean it to be one. I cannot be sure about that but I *am* sure that it would have gone better if it had been done by a company of four actors, instead of—as is the case—two actors and two entertainers.<sup>18</sup>

Her utilization of effusive language such as "wonderfully ingenious," relaxed vernacular like "doesn't entirely come off," and the italicization of the word "am" strategically establishes a familiar, dynamic conversation with her readers. Oliver continues her side of the dialogue by

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<sup>18</sup> Edith Oliver, "Off-Broadway: Mr. Nichols, Miss Jellicoe, and Mr. Bedford," *The New Yorker*, June 6, 1964, 86, 88.

clarifying her dichotomization of actor versus entertainer, “The distinction I am making is that an actor convinces, or tries to convince, the audience that he means what he is doing, no matter how outrageous it may be, whereas an entertainer and the audience are, or should be, in a kind of partnership—the one to amuse and the other to be amused—in which conviction plays no role.”<sup>19</sup> Kerr also performed his arguments in front of his audience, but he let his unanswered questions ring into the ether of the page whereas Oliver provides her readers with a guiding hand. She caters to the *New Yorker* readership of long-form literature by proffering a script for their personal conversations on the topic. Oliver’s criticism is not informative on the dramaturgical context of a production; instead she includes a narration of plot while embellishing it with her romanticizations and microaggressions. In her review of the 1981 premiere of Christopher Durang’s *Beyond Therapy* at the Phoenix Theatre, she recounts part of the plot in a series of brash clauses,

We meet, in their offices, Prudence’s therapist, a tantrummy lecher, and Bruce’s therapist, a clucking hen of a woman with a Snoopy hand puppet and a case of galloping aphasia, and, in Bruce’s apartment, the nettled, angry lover and (via a noisy phone call) the lover’s Jewish mother. As for Prudence, bewildered and confounded, every time she asserts herself she is out-argued or put down.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike Brantley, her depictions of story are thorough but not referential or practical to a theatregoer for empirical reasons. Oliver trusts that her readers believe in the merits of her interpretation of the art without lingering commercial agenda. She is comfortable expressing

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Edith Oliver, “Off-Broadway: O Frabjous Streep!,” *The New Yorker*, January 19, 1981, 91.

her biases as a critic because she demonstrates that if her readership did not want her frank opinion, they would decline her invitation and read the *Post* instead.

**Brendan Gill.** *The New Yorker's* theatre section was controlled for decades by both Brendan Gill and Edith Oliver at the helm. Gill, a Yale graduate, was hired by the magazine in 1936 as a staff writer. During the next six decades at the publication, Gill wrote for the Talk of the Town and Profiles sections, contributed both theatre and film criticism, and served as the magazine's primary architecture critic for the last nine years of his career at the magazine. Gill was never specifically named senior drama critic of *The New Yorker*, but considering both the longevity of his beat and the fact that he covered Broadway exclusively, he would be categorized as such based on the previously addressed parameters. The magazine does not invest as much clout into the titles of their writers as *The New York Times*, encouraging equity amongst its staff rather than an inflated streak of superiority.

In Gill's 1969 review of Jay Allen's *Forty Carats*, he uses the familiar first-person throughout the entire article, an attribute characteristic of not only his partner Oliver but also of the magazine's overarching goal of appealing to the reader's sense of inclusion in the conversation at hand. If the author can speak on his own behalf, rather than resorting to general terms or the accusatory second-person, the reader is invited to interpret the work by the author's recommendation instead of his demand. Gill's words are brimming with the enthusiasm and unbridled sincerity that comes from being an outsider looking into the theatre community. As someone who was invested in all kinds of visual and performing art and not

theatre solitarily, Gill provides a unique perspective and, therefore, tone that has not yet been explored in this retrospective of theatre criticism: earnestness. He begins his review by stating,

The short and simple annals of the poor aren't a patch on the short and simple annals of success— what does one need to say about something that works well except that it works well and then “Hurrah”? I can be brief about “Forty Carats;” I can say “Hurrah.” It is a silly trifle so nearly perfect of its kind—so merrily untrue to life and so stoutly true to trifledom—that I doubt if the bleakest curmudgeon in the land would dare to whisper a word against it. What could be more endearing, I ask you, than a comedy that makes one laugh at jokes that were no doubt breaking people up in Ninevah and that yet sound newly stumbled upon?<sup>21</sup>

Critics like Rich and Isherwood revel in distancing themselves from the reader for the purpose of forming an argument with an agenda, but Gill lays out each passing thought for his readers to peruse at their leisure without a formulated goal in mind.

Gill reserves few words for explaining the plot and characters and even fewer for the actors and the rest of the creative team, but he does like to contextualize the work for his readers. At the start of his review of the 1973 revival of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* at the Circle in the Square Theatre, he explains,

At best, the work is radically imperfect, and the wonder from one moment to the next—and indeed, from one hour to the next—is not that it can be made to play at all. It is divided into four not very shapely acts and runs for four hours and fifteen minutes. O'Neill supervised the rehearsals and overruled many objections to its length voiced at the time by close friends and professional associates; he felt that the sheer duration, however irritating, was needed to give scale and weight to the message he had to impart. Alas, he was more impressed by the profundity of his message than any of the rest of us need be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Brendan Gill, “Solving the Generation Gap,” *The New Yorker*, January 4, 1969, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Brendan Gill, “Stars in Your Eyes,” *The New Yorker*, December 24, 1973, 56.

He did not need to address the intimidating length for a prospective theatergoer in order to produce a satisfactory review of the production, but knowing that the duration of a performance would be a deterrent and point of concern for audiences, Gill decides that he will not only disclose the specific length of the play but also explain the politics surrounding why the playwright insisted upon it. This information in the review does not necessarily enhance the experience for his readers, but moving past that particular point of contention does encourage the fruitful discussion about the message of the play that follows.

Brendan Gill's theatre legacy cannot be isolated from Edith Oliver's critical contributions to the magazine. For over thirty years together, they provided a complementary perspective on the theatre landscape in both the Broadway and off-Broadway circuits. Both writers found that a conversational approach to an otherwise esoteric area of interest was the most attractive for readers of *The New Yorker*, who subscribed to the magazine for its dedication to publishing the written word in all of its literary and analytical incarnations.

**John Lahr.** Edith Oliver also shared her Broadway beat with John Lahr when he joined *The New Yorker* as senior drama critic in 1992 before she retired from the magazine the following year. Prior to his theatre criticism at *The New Yorker*, Lahr not only wrote for numerous publications like *The Nation* and *The Village Voice* but also published twelve volumes of fiction, criticism, and, most notably, biographies, including that of his father, actor and comedian Bert Lahr. Born to performer parents (His mother, Mildred, was a former Ziegfeld Follies girl.), Lahr found himself surrounded by the harrowingly harmonious logistics of the art

of making art even as a child. His sentiment for the creation and criticism of theatre is based in the reality of a world in which theatre exists into perpetuity, whether or not one chooses to engage with it or proves to be instrumental in its progress. During an interview conducted by *The New Yorker* for their *Out Loud* podcast following his retirement from the senior drama critic post at the magazine, Lahr confesses, "I don't believe that critics should be separate from artists because otherwise, that's a recipe for ignorance."<sup>23</sup> Lahr reflects this equalizing philosophy in his criticism by employing his own skills as a marvel of literary prose. His reviews are exorbitantly long in comparison to Oliver's cogent criticism because of his ardent investment in a comprehensive and learned approach to theatre. Thus, Lahr's reviews are reminiscent of the biographies he writes: illustrative, specific, and affectingly personal. In his 1994 review of the original Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim's *Passion* at the Plymouth Theatre entitled "Love in Gloom," John Lahr initiates his discourse by establishing his own editorialization of the musical's pathetic martyr, Fosca, stating, "There are animals in the jungle that survive by playing dead, and Fosca, the heroine, of Stephen Sondheim's 'Passion,' is one of them. Ugly, hysterical, unrelenting, joy-less, she's an amalgam of alienations and personifies both romantic agony and the dead end to which Sondheim, in his perverse brilliance, has brought the American musical."<sup>24</sup> However, the review itself does not become a biography on the character of Fosca through a critical lens but rather a biographical assessment of the musical itself. Lahr recounts the compendious existence of its conception, plot, and

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<sup>23</sup> Deborah Treisman, "Twenty-Year Run: John Lahr on his career as the senior theater critic for *The New Yorker*," Interview with John Lahr, *Out Loud*, Podcast audio, December 8, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> John Lahr, "Love in Gloom," *The New Yorker*, May 23, 1994, 89.

performances from his conversant perspective; he incorporates history for his readers in order to fairly contextualize his opinions and speculations. He blasphemes the otherwise critically acclaimed composer-lyricist Sondheim by saying,

Sondheim, whose musical ideas are rarely as bold as his lyric ones, is in rebellion against “tunes” (which is why he doesn’t provide many) and the notion of himself as a “tunesmith.” We are coaxed to see Sondheim as a thinker and the musical as a statement. But the formal qualities of verse—rhyme’s combination of rigor and delight—make it a blunt analytic instrument, “unsuitable for controversy,” as W. H. Auden has pointed out. Nevertheless, the public, ever mindful of Sondheim’s greatness (“Is Stephen Sondheim God?” a *New York* headline asked recently), sits reverently, without intermission, to receive the pieties and pontificating of “*Passion*,” which typically has no passion, only ratiocination.<sup>25</sup>

However, Lahr continues and qualifies his previous thoughts by explaining the relationship between Sondheim and his librettist-director collaborator, James Lapine, with whom Sondheim previously worked on the renowned musicals *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) and *Into the Woods* (1987). He states,

What we get in this listless epistolary musical, where the main character spend much of their time singing love letters to and from each other, is the results of Sondheim’s recent experiments with the play’s director and librettist, James Lapine: not the big heart but the dead heart; not the joy of the pleasure dome but the hush of the lecture hall; not the dancing but the reading.<sup>26</sup>

Lahr does not need to spend the first page of his review expounding upon his aggressive disdain for the musical, but he invests in this manner because he believes the audience deserves to know the inclinations he possessed before stepping into the theatre to see *Passion*. As

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

consumers of criticism, readers are often posed against a journalist who takes advantage of his or her authoritative position as senior drama critic in order to satisfy an inflating god complex, but Lahr takes specific action to portray himself in a fallible, subjective light, giving permission to his readers to do the same for themselves and the artists he is critiquing. John Lahr's vast experience in bearing witness to the lives of others through his reverent and intensive writing is unmistakable in his theatre criticism.

**Hilton Als.** Similar John Lahr, Hilton Als wrote for *The Village Voice* and *The Nation* before joining the *New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1994 and a theatre critic in 2002. Als has also published two books: a meditative promulgation of race, gender, and personal identity, *The women* (1996), and a collection of semiautobiographical essays and criticism on identity and privilege, *White Girls* (2013). Als' works is representative of an irreverent shift in early twenty-first-century theatre criticism towards an approachable informality for the consumer. If Hilton Als can start his review of the 2014 Broadway revival of Leonard Bernstein's *On the Town* by saying, "The director John Rando's crap sentimentality undermines so much of what should be interesting about 'On the Town' (now in revival at the Lyric) that you spend at least half your effort to finally enjoy something of the show,"<sup>27</sup> so can every one of his readers with social media account. Where John Lahr encourages his readers to find fault and flaw in fawned-over figures and forms, Als permits them to take advantage of the same freedom of expression. Critics spearheading this unintentional movement, like Ben Brantley and Hilton Als, are leveling their own plane of criticism by amplifying semi-permanent word-of-mouth criticism online.

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<sup>27</sup> Hilton Als, "Two Musicals," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 2014.



Highlighting the voices of general theatregoers is valuable in its own right because these are the people who populate houses every night and are directly connected to the success or failure of a production. However, theatre criticism takes on new meaning when everyone, despite their levels of training, instruction, or experience, can be a theatre critic. It signifies that an isolated group of authorities on theatre is not necessary in the theatre community for reasons other than entertainment or getting a second opinion. This does not deter theatre critics from composing reviews that speak from a dogmatic position at a major publication, but they are yelling into the virtual cacophony just like everyone else with an opinion. Als opens his 2014 review of the limited run of *Macbeth* at the Park Avenue Armory with as much blasé and shrewdness as he can muster by saying,

In a way, it doesn't really matter what anyone thinks about the current revival of "Macbeth" (at the Park Avenue Armory, directed by Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh), because it's not there for our critical engagement. Rather, this British import's real function, like the Royal Shakespeare Company's visit a few seasons back, is to provide an occasion for the audience to buzz along on the high of "real" culture: British actors doing a very, very old British thing.<sup>28</sup>

This kind of self-aware decaying of jurisdiction is glaring in all of Als' criticism; his critical voice is often impudent and pithy as a result. It is apparent that Als himself realizes that his words as a theatre critic do not wield as much influence as his predecessors, including Brendan Gill and John Lahr at *The New Yorker*, because they will eventually disappear into the vacuum of microcriticism and amateur blogs.

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<sup>28</sup> Hilton Als, "Getting 'Macbeth' Right," *The New Yorker*, June 10, 2014.

### *Theatre Journalists at New York magazine and beyond*

Across all genres, readers seek specific publications in order to fulfill their individual priorities. A person interested in international finance subscribes to *Financial Times* over *The Wall Street Journal*, despite both newspapers covering economics, because *Financial Times* specializes in the topic whereas its presence in *The Wall Street Journal* is fractional relative to the rest of the paper's content. A similar logic applies to someone choosing to read *New York* magazine over another New York-based publication like *The New York Times*. The weekly *New York* magazine is loosely focused on city-specific pieces of politics, culture, and human interest and supplemented by national news and popular culture; *The New York Times* produces a daily paper with specific regional editions covering everything from world news to food, sports to real estate. Due to the evolving technological accessibility to print media, both *New York* and *The New York Times* have a comparable digital presence and are no longer confined to the physical parameters of their issues, weekly or daily, because both publications are consistently producing online content for their consumers. Digital distribution levels the playing field for online-only news aggregates, theatre-centric and not, to compete with more established periodicals.

**John Simon.** Over the course of his career, John Simon has written cultural criticism concerning film, literature, music, and drama at eleven different publications, including *Esquire*, *The New Criterion*, and *Bloomberg*. Additionally, he spent thirty-six years writing for *New York* magazine as their primary drama critic and was dismissed from the position in 2005 under dubious circumstances. When asked by *Playbill* reporter Robert Simonson about the decision

surrounding his termination by the magazine's Editor-in-chief Adam Moss, Simon responded, "I expected it...Then again, my birthday is coming up, so I didn't think it was a very good birthday present."<sup>29</sup> Simon's criticism, often infused with vivid insults and lacerating prejudice, has rarely been well-received within the theatre community. His reviews are characteristically negative, often leaning on hurtful jabs at the performers' personal appearances and lives rather than assessing quality of their work.

Simon's technical mastery of language and prose is upheld by his multiple degrees from Harvard University, including a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, but the motivation to write scathing criticism without basis in constructive evaluation is in question. An analysis of Simon's writing must address the purpose of theatre criticism itself. Consumers of theatre criticism prioritize publications that represent a combination of three major factors on a spectrum: constructiveness, information, and entertainment. Constructive criticism is written in pursuit of progress, highlighting areas of a production that work and those that require improvement in order to initiate dialogue within the community and prospective patrons. Informational criticism exists to educate readers about the specifics of a production including but not limited to venue, running time and dates, plot, cast and creatives, and any contextualizing information, if deemed necessary. This kind of criticism does not concern itself with the synthesis of opinions but rather directs attention to the facts that simplify the theatregoing process for potential audience members. Criticism written for entertainment is the most varied in content because

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Simonson, "John Simon to Leave Long-Held Post at New York Magazine; McCarter Named New Critic," Playbill.com, May 10, 2005.

of the highly subjective nature of amusement, therefore yielding the most volatile contrast in its intentions. Entertainment can encompass everything from the positively enthusiastic to the cruel. Cruelty in theatre criticism falls in line with the antiquated spectacles of gladiatorial combat of the Roman Empire and auto-da-fé of the Spanish Inquisition. People are intrigued by pain administered in a public arena not only physically but also in writing, whether or not they agree with it. John Simon's criticism may be well-crafted, but it is unmistakably cruel.

In Simon's review of the 2005 revival of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at the Longacre Theatre, he scorns,

Kathleen Turner's Martha is a new addition to the bestiary, a braying mantis. She has a voice like a baritone sax issuing from an oil drum, and hams even with her silences. Your standard-issue college president's daughter can only aspire to being such a foulmouthed fishwife, and no younger history teacher, however hell-bent on climbing the academic ladder, would have married this anti-sexual, castrating slattern.

Well, yes, one might have: the sorry specimen of a man portrayed by Bill Irwin. This George, barely even a wimp, is a mewling, posturing, frog-face-pulling, spineless hand puppet, with the gestures and grimaces of a used-up mime, hardly an actor.<sup>30</sup>

Simon's only comment on Kathleen Turner's acting is when he says that she "hams...with her silences." The rest of his commentary is based in insulting her trademark voice and using animal-related language to objectify her ("bestiary," "braying mantis," "fishwife"), and he concludes it with a purposefully oxymoronic derision on Martha's sexuality, "anti-sexual, castrating slattern." Even if one discounts everything before his remarks about George as a reflection of character rather than the performer himself, Simon's careful use of the word

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<sup>30</sup> John Simon, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," *New York*, April 11, 2005.

“mime” in the final sentence digs at Bill Irwin’s legendary clowning to discredit him as an actor, which is also a cornerstone of Irwin’s career.

On the rare occasion that Simon enjoys a performance, he twists his words in a more amusing fashion. His readers can sense his desire to wedge as much wordplay as he possibly can into one sentence or turn of phrase. In his review of the 2000 revival of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s comedy *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, he ambitiously constructs the following passage: “With Whiteside, he turns, if not quite a new leaf, at least a new petal. The character is semi-Lane, semi-lion, and the actor nicely adds the bitchy fierceness to his customary campiness.”<sup>31</sup> In these two sentences, Simon’s affinity for writing expressions in pairs (“new leaf...new petal,” “semi-Lane, semi-lion,” “bitchy fierceness...customary campness”), noting repetition (“new,” “semi-”), and using alliteration (Lane/lion, customary/campness) is tersely exemplified. These devices do not substantiate anything specific about Nathan Lane’s performance as the outrageous Sheridan Whiteside other than it being biting flamboyant and possibly based on Lane himself.

John Simon leans on florid language to bolster his credibility as a writer, but as a critic, when he fails to evaluate the work at hand and instead resorts to ridicule, his credentials are dismissed with the swift blow of his figurative axe. When his criticism is positive, it is used as an exercise of prose rather than a constructive reflection. His criticism of cruelty is entertainment at *New York* magazine but would be outlawed at *The New York Times*. After leaving the

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<sup>31</sup> John Simon, “Nathan’s Famous,” *New York*, August 7, 2000.

magazine in 2005, Simon relocated from print to digital media, contributing criticism to *Bloomberg*, *The Westchester Guardian*, and the *Yonkers Tribune*, a website that identifies as “the designated home of the acid-tongued bloggers by ‘The New York Times’.” The internet is where Simon found that he could exercise the breadth of his opinion without limitations. In 2010, Simon he started a blog entitled *Uncensored John Simon* for this very purpose.

**Steven Suskin.** John Simon is not the only long-standing critic to revitalize his career online. Theatre critic and historian Steven Suskin worked as drama critic at *Variety* for over six years, following the move of previous critic Charles Isherwood to *The New York Times*, and then started writing theatre criticism for *The Huffington Post*, the online news and blog aggregate in 2013. He has written a dozen volumes on music and theatre including *Show Tunes: The Songs, Shows, and Careers of Broadway’s Major Composers* (1986); *Second Act Trouble: Behind the Scenes of Broadway’s Big Musical Bombs* (2006); and *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations* (2009). Suskin also has an extensive career as a critic and columnist for *Playbill* covering Broadway and Off-Broadway productions as well as reviewing new media in his On The Record column. Unlike the other critics previously discussed, Suskin began his career in theatre production as a company manager, working on Broadway shows such as the 1977 revival of *Hair*, Eva Le Gallienne’s 1982 production of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the original 1985 production of *Singin’ in the Rain*. His unique perspective as not only an enthusiast but as a sympathetic insider is reflected in his critical writing.

In his *Huffington Post* review of the 2014 Broadway production of *The Bridges of Madison County* at the Schoenfeld Theatre, Suskin immediately communicates to his readers the aspects of the show that he enjoyed and found favorable,

The attributes of *The Bridges of Madison County*, the new musical at the Schoenfeld, are vibrant and most welcome: the strong singing/acting performances of Kelli O'Hara and Steven Pasquale; the score from Jason Robert Brown, at his lushest and most radiant; and. . . well, the performances of O'Hara and Pasquale. Here we have a musical which in its finest moments offers the sort of robustly romantic Broadway-style singing--and writing--that brings to mind such treasures as *Carousel* and *The Most Happy Fella*. Those shows, when mounted properly, offer emotional peaks and climaxes so effective that there's not a dry eye in the house. In *Bridges of Madison County*, when romance goes asunder and the sympathetic lovers are forced apart, we sit there stonefaced, with nary a wet eye in the house. At least, not where I was sitting. You enjoy the wonderful performances and the numerous soaring ballads, frustrated that this exceptional work isn't contained in a more workable musical.<sup>32</sup>

His tone is conversational yet the form of his review follows a loose formal writing structure, with a clear introduction, a section of background information and plot summary, body paragraphs with specific examples that echo the introduction, and a conclusion. Therefore, it is convenient for a reader to navigate, especially when scrolling on a webpage. Suskin's criticism is an intersection between the informational and the interpretive. He contextualizes the work and makes a point to address direction and design as much as the performances, attributes of theatre criticism that are often overlooked when name recognition is more important than constructive commentary. Even when Suskin finds fault in a production, he is direct and explains, from his perspective in the audience, what was ineffective. He expounds on his issues with the direction accordingly,

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<sup>32</sup> Steven Suskin, "Aisle View: Bridge Over Troubled Adaptation," *The Huffington Post*, February 20, 2014.

The fleshing out with subsidiary comedy scenes--and the use of the ghostly ensemble as scenery builders--was no doubt carefully conceived by Brown, librettist Marsha Norman, and Sher. It works against the show, though, harming it more and more with each interruption and deadening the beauties of the score and the stars. (The scenery itself, designed by Michael Yeargan and lit by Donald Holder, is just right and otherwise highly effective.)<sup>33</sup>

In this passage, Suskin illustrates the scene for the reader without spoiling the nuances of Bartlett Sher's direction, but he does not shy from pointing out how the Sher's choices distract from composer Jason Robert Brown's score and the design of Yeargan and Holder at those points in the show. He also states his criticism without using erudite language or references that could alienate readers who are not familiar with the process of theatre production.

Steven Suskin's criticism lies in the neutral good of theatre criticism. His reviews are accessible both in his writing style and in the convenience of a digitized oeuvre of work. Suskin satisfies the growing need for theatre criticism to be a reference for his readership without compromising the goal of his position as drama critic, which is to appraise a production both objectively and subjectively with the intention of gauging how it served the story and how it was communicated to the audience.

### *Theatre Historians as Critics*

By nature, anecdotally driven theatre history is rooted in critical analysis. History itself is framed by those who are brave (or ostentatious) enough to write it with authority, and because theatre only exists as intended by its creators for a relatively brief moment in time, those who

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



choose to preserve its ephemerality in writing risk preserving his or her own predilections as well, much like the theatre criticism found in print journalism.

**Steven Suskin.** Many of Steven Suskin's books on theatre history seem strictly referential, but his sensibility as a theatre critic for the process of the art is apparent in his historical writing as well, especially when he himself has experienced the productions he is immortalizing in his books. In his volume *The Sound of Broadway Music: A Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations*, Suskin covers over a hundred years of orchestrators and their shows, navigates cast recording excerpts, explains the relationship between composer and orchestrators using specific examples and firsthand accounts, including his own. In a section entitled "Sweeney in the Pit with Steve," Suskin recounts his experience being invited to listen to *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* performed at the Kennedy Center from the orchestra pit. He had no idea that he would be listening steps away from the composer himself: Stephen Sondheim. In his account of the experience, Suskin walks through the elements of *Sweeney Todd* that reflect how masterful the book, music, and lyrics are, even independently of its staging. He details the events by writing,

The music turns into a demonic waltz as Lovett offers Todd a bite of an imaginary meat pie. "Have a little priest," she sings. As Todd tastes the meat pie, he says—what else?—"Heavenly!" The house roars, and Sondheim has achieved what might well have seemed impossible. Within one continuous scene, a glorious male duet rhapsodizing on the wonders of "Pretty Women," an attempted murder, climax into a viciously mesmerizing mad scene, topped by a stunningly loquacious, punningly mad, rollicking *valse*

*macabre*.<sup>34</sup>

Suskin's anecdote brims with his own perception of the drama and its potency. A rave is hardly interesting journalism, but in the context of this collection of history, the enthusiasm is fitting for his audience. Suskin praises both Sondheim's craftsmanship as a wordsmith and his unorthodox contrast of a waltz (*valse macabre*) against such a violent display of carnage. Not only are Suskin's readers searching for information in his writing, but they are also seeking to experience the production by proxy of the author. Considering that drama critics at periodicals still write with a prospective audience in mind (and indirectly function in tandem with production marketing), they have influence over whether or not their readers will see the shows in question and, consequently, cannot reveal anything in their writing. In the case of theatre history, recapitulating the event with every passing detail is essential to the desires of the readership.

Even in his book *Show Tunes: The Songs, Shows, and Careers of Broadway's Major Composers*, which is set up like an encyclopedia of names and titles, Suskin cannot help but play the critic. In his blurb on Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, he says,

Sondheim and Prince attempted something different, and they certainly succeeded. Once again, the work was inaccessible due to an uninvolved book (although that was by no means the only problem). But the score was uniformly interesting (although it took repeated hearings to enjoy), containing some of Sondheim's finest writing. *Pretty Lady* is Sondheim at his most beautifully melodic, and I gladly hold it up to those who criticize his work as being cold and unemotional. *Someone in a Tree* and *Four Black Dragons* are wonderful, multipart story/songs, deftly covering a great deal of information and

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<sup>34</sup> Steven Suskin, *The Sound of Broadway Music: The Book of Orchestrators and Orchestrations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 288.

similarly building to glorious musical/choral conclusions. And *A Bowler Hat* is truly exceptional writing: a lucid statement of the show's overall theme, with the character himself ironically illustrating his point. But PACIFIC OVERTURES's book and artsy production scheme overwhelmed the score; the high point of the evening was designer Boris Aronson's battleship.<sup>35</sup>

In an attempt to maintain a casual structure, Suskin begins many of his sentences with conjunctions, but he follows standard persuasive structure: state the argument, present the evidence, explain how the evidence proves the argument. This passage is centered on how the Sondheim's songs make an otherwise misguided musical worthwhile. "Pretty Lady" is presented as example of Sondheim's pursuit of emotional honesty. "Someone in a Tree" and "Four Black Dragons" are cited as examples of Sondheim's excellence in writing music with a multifaceted musical texture and narrative. By focusing on the few songs that did work, Suskin frames his lackluster opinion of the production (overpowering, abstract design; unaffecting book) by sharing what he found rewarding which is, of course, the purpose of his book.

**Ethan Mordden.** Ethan Mordden specializes in writing theatre history, but he, too, began his literary career as a journalist. First publishing a book entitled *Better Foot Forward: The History of the American Musical Theatre* in 1976, after having graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in History and moving to New York, Mordden began writing short stories and a column for the literary magazine *Christopher Street* based on his life as a gay man in New York City in the 1980s. In addition to the *Buddies* cycle, a compilation of his short stories from the magazine, Mordden also published other works of fiction, including *How*

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<sup>35</sup> Steven Suskin, *Show Tunes: The Songs, Shows, and Careers of Broadway's Major Composers*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 283.

*Long Has This Been Going On?* (1995) and *The Passionate Attention of an Interesting Man* (2013), and *One Day in France* (2015). The combination of Mordden's background in narrative composition and his passion for theatre became the impetus for his most ambitious undertaking, a multivolume recounting of the Broadway musical through the decades starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1970s. The linear nature of this series addresses not only how musicals fit in the chronology of theatre history but also how they connect and why.

When discussing in his book *Anything Goes: A History of American Musical Theatre* the implications of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* on the theatre landscape following its premiere, Mordden infuses his dense text with unmistakable bias. He states,

There is as well the novelty of Bernstein's use of modern jazz in the score. *The Nervous Set* slipped jazz in as atmospheric tinkle; Bernstein thrust it front and center in the very first notes, accompanying a dance establishing the Jets' and Sharks' conflict. The melodies are unsettling, angular, stretching over nervy intervals, riffs rather than a tune. (Oddly, all of the music had to be written to be sung, in a bizarre reimposition of the merry villagers' opening chorus. The lyrics were dropped because Robbins could realize the ethnic antagonism better through dance.) This was, truly, new music on Broadway.<sup>36</sup>

Although not overt, Mordden's confusion over the use of jazz in Bernstein's score is infused into this passage with passive aggression. Use of the word "novelty" alone is immediately reductive of the material. When followed closely by a series of jazz buzz words ("angular," "nervy," "riffs") and observations, it demonstrates a lack of understanding of how Bernstein's career and scholarship in music, especially outside of the theatre realm, has influenced his compositional

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<sup>36</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Anything Goes: A History of American Musical Theatre*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, 198.

style and therefore his musicals. Mordden's writing may not always be interdisciplinarily erudite, but it is earnest. When covering the Mark Charlap musical *Kelly* in *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s*, he says,

True, *Kelly* isn't a good show. Nor does it have a good score. It is, however, an unusual show; not another feeble mediocrity. It certainly went wrong in its frenzied let's-try-anything tryout, but it wasn't a bad idea. Its authors, composer Moose Charlap and word man Eddie Lawrence, had in mind an extravagant look at an immigrant-Irish culture in late-nineteenth-century New York, centering on a feisty anti-hero who keep trying and failing to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge...*Kelly* was to slice up life in an artful realism. The songs belonged to no established genre, and most of them included dollops of spoken lines, as if the characters were ad-libbing. Some of the lyrics had the quality of the arcane accusations that street loons scream as passing strangers.<sup>37</sup>

Mordden wastes no time in telling his readers that *Kelly* is a poor show, but he entices them to invest in learning about it nonetheless. He identifies its redeeming qualities (interesting subject, variety of songs, startling lyrics) so the reader is encouraged to evaluate the show for themselves and to resist letting its early demise get in the way of a new experience. Critics must give agency to his or her readers to explore the work at their own hand and subvert the expectations of popularity versus content.

Mordden's work is not intentionally written with argument in mind, but his writing (and inherent bias) does influence the way his readers will perceive a piece of theatre. Having an opinion is important to critic and historians alike, but one must recognize the increasing gravity of those positions' responsibilities. Accessibility has changed the way that writing permeates the masses. The digital archiving of publications is a relatively new technological phenomenon,

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<sup>37</sup> Ethan Mordden, *Open a New Window: The Broadway Musical in the 1960s*, New York: PALGRAVE™, 2001, 194-195.

and now writing cannot be hidden deep within a library or discarded with the recyclables, never to be read again. Anything that is published is now available for discovery by anyone anywhere. Before the development of the *New York Times'* online TimesMachine, the criticism of Brooks Atkinson and Walter Kerr only existed in the form of oversized, archival tomes after its initial publication. The same applies for the criticism of Brendan Gill, Edith Oliver, and John Lahr and the *New Yorker* online archive. Over a hundred years of print stored for convenient access at any time of day and thumbing through published collections of theatre criticism (like Frank Rich's *Hot Seat: Theatre Criticism for The New York Times* and John Simon on *Theatre: Criticism 1974-2003*) has been usurped in practicality by the prospect of a quick inquiry on a search engine. Due to this constant conservancy, criticism is its own kind of short-form theatre history.

## CONCLUSION

Theatre criticism as it is perceived by the general public and theatre community alike has changed dramatically in the last century. With the exchange of information and self-publication readily available to anyone with an internet connection and something to say, print journalism has made the crucial transition to producing digital content in order to maintain its prominence in the newly formed arena of political and cultural discourse among its readers. Discourse is the pivotal concept in that development because for decades, the communication between readers and the publications to which they subscribed was slow and inconvenient, and now that contacting authors and editors can be reduced to an instantaneous, strategic implementation of social media and email, a voice that was once considered singular and omnipotent has been humbled by the cacophonous outreach of an enthusiastic public.

In theatre, giving agency to create and challenge criticism not only to its artists but also to its audiences has fostered accountability towards theatre critics. Criticism of theatre faces a challenge unique to the performing arts. It is difficult to separate the individual, especially performers, from the content they create and inhabit, so when critics evaluate productions, it can feel like an attack on them personally rather than an assessment of their art, intentionally or not. When senior drama critics were the considered one of the few widely respected voices in theatre, that perceived aggression created animosity between artists and critics. Now that anyone can be a theatre critic if they so choose, even if those major drama critics explicitly dislike a performance, there are thousands of other people present to reassure a show of their value in the theatre landscape, and more often than not, they are also the people actually

buying their own tickets. Despite the increase in amateur theatre criticism, drama critics at major publications still hold a title with cachet, and their writing can be influential in terms of marketing a show with a certain level of esteemed approval based in the respected history of the position and the institution. Both professional and amateur theatre criticism can and should coexist because audiences will ultimately decide to see a show (or not) based on a formula of factors (cost, location, content, schedule, etc.) that cannot be reliably predetermined by perception of criticism alone.

As a historical reference, professional theatre criticism is at an advantage. When a publication has been a cultural institution for over a century, its writing not only becomes a record of a nation's political exploits and social developments but also how they were perceived by citizens as it was happening. The same reasoning applies to theatre criticism. Unlike theatre historians, critics at *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *New York* magazine have been able to look at the New York theatre landscape as it has evolved in real time. Notwithstanding the longevity of these publications, the lack of diverse voices throughout the annals of these periodicals contextualizes the history it preserves from a narrow, privileged perspective. Although efforts are being made to rectify the decades of severe underrepresentation of women and people of color in mainstream journalism, it would take another century to comparatively conserve history at the same scale with any semblance of equity. Historians have the distinction of writing about theatre based both on secondhand accounts and personal experiences. They are able to look at theatre after careful rumination and attention to pertinent details of reference; the tone and language used in their writing



informs how their readers perceive the art they are documenting. Theatre critics and historians published in these newspapers, magazines, and history books are responsible for the art that will be deemed relevant and important to generations of readers, and the gravity of their position at this caliber cannot be disregarded.

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