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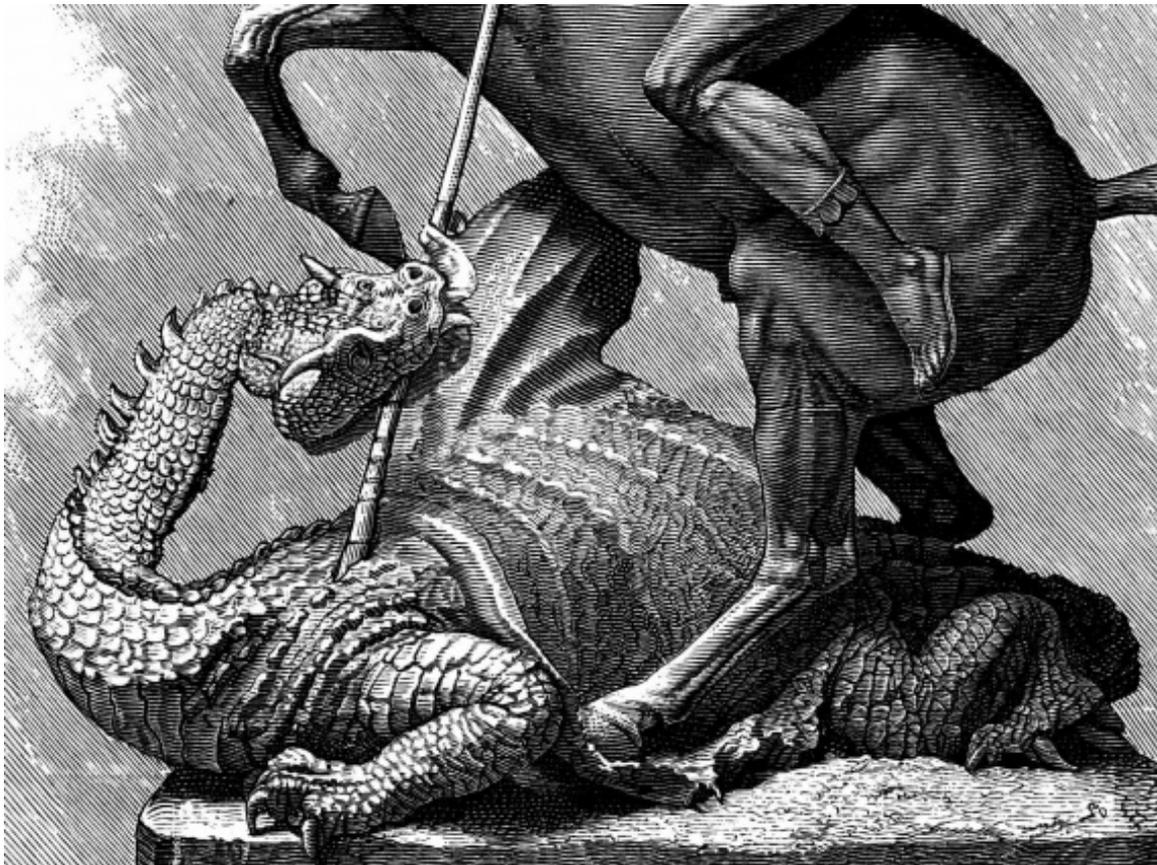
Our Critical Juncture

Sylvie Drake · Thursday, October 25th, 2012

In 2007, theatre critic, writer and blogger Les Spindle wrote an article for Back Stage West that defended an unpopular position: that it takes a certain level of verve, intellect, knowledge and discipline to be a responsible and readable critic.

Fast forward to 2012. On October 7, *The New York Times* online under its “Room for Debate” rubric, popped the question once more—and more specifically: “Do We Need Professional Critics”?

Good question. Nine people were invited to discuss the issue and while we cannot reproduce the entire exchange (you may read it [here](#)), what’s notable is that (a) the question won’t die and (b) so little has changed. To my surprise though, the *discussion* has: it has deepened.



I put up a defense of professional critics for *L.A. Stage* magazine in 2007. Today I’m using portions of that argument, along with fresh thoughts that reinforce and amplify my views.

The Zagat Phenomenon

The notion of the populist review may have started with Zagat, Trip Advisor and Amazon—consumer guides that promote the idea that we can all comment competently on our latest hotel accommodations, expensive meal or, by extension, play, film, concert or art show. Of course we can. Pick a number from one to ten. But that does not translate into a nuanced and thoughtful assessment of the chef’s efforts or a measure of his achievement or whether the cuisine at the French Laundry is worth the sizzling price (to say nothing of evaluating a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth or Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*).

Some of us don’t see this as a problem. At the time, Sasha Anawalt, Director of the USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Program (an intensive for young professional critics) and the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Theatre and Musical Theatre, vigorously defended the proliferation of anybody reviews:

“The great, glorious thing about the Internet,” she argued, “is the freedom, the ability to create a community on many levels that has porous, flexible walls and boundaries... What on earth is wrong with that? As long as the keepers of the site screen the reader’s letters before they go up on the site and use common sense, the world and art should be safe.”

But doesn’t that need for a filter—an editor (censor?) who decides what’s fit to print—negate an absolute cyberdemocracy? (Remember Michael Kinsley’s disastrous attempt to turn *Los Angeles Times* editorials into wikitorials? There is a role for public forums; that wasn’t one of them.)

Don’t Call it Criticism

The opposite view is that we are merely expanding a growing tolerance for mediocrity. Venting an opinion is not the same as having a modulated response to creative work. Opening up the critical field to anyone with a computer is merchandising. There are uses for that, just don’t call it criticism. It doesn’t qualify and—crucially—shows very little respect for the artists involved. Of course we can all choose to read or not *any* review. But shouldn’t we aspire to cultivate critics with a knowledgeable, incisive and compelling style and point of view? Critics we can respect?

What everyone’s-a-critic has done is not so much level the playing field as flatten it. It dulls the senses when it should stimulate them. This process of degradation began some 30 years ago while I was still a theatre critic at the *Los Angeles Times*. Editors then began favoring an increase in advance pieces about the arts while whittling away at reviews or competitive opinions, reducing their space, prominence and number, even as the number of events worthy of criticism kept rising. Advance pieces are safe. They provide context and information while staying clear of controversy. This drift only grew as newspapers became less sure of their function and technology overtook them at every turn.

Democracy doesn’t work when you’re looking to well-grounded folks for educated opinion and accuracy. Throwing open the critical floodgates to anyone with time, an ego and a yen to chat may result in the occasional interesting exchange but, by and large, it’s anything goes. And yet the only reason to read a review is to be enlightened. It also should be the only reason to write one.

Honest ‘bros’

Ironically, a friend sent me a couple of “bro” reviews from *Theatermania* that I had never seen. These are reactions—you can’t quite call them reviews—written by jocks who’d never set foot in a theatre until this once. What’s remarkable about them is that they nearly disprove my argument. They are enlightening and funny rants in a welcome way, because they completely acknowledge their inexperience with the medium and are laughing at, as well as with, their responses without a shred of pretense. In short, they are completely *honest*. It’s a testament to how much the world has changed that we can read these and laugh without being offended, and that’s because they are neither stupid nor self-important. They are born more out of innocence than ignorance. Ignorance, after all, is only offensive when it is denied. So yes, there is room for laughing at ourselves; just don’t call it criticism.

I'm not defending "professional" critics vs. ad-hoc ones. There's good and bad in both places. Standards of professional criticism vary widely and sadly hover mostly around the shallows. It's not every day that a George Bernard Shaw or a Stark Young or a Harold Clurman comes along—and even they had their bad days. But they took the job seriously.

Criticism is an undemocratic occupation. Martin Bernheimer, former classical music critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, insisted that claims to *objective* criticism are inherently false. He was being paid to be *subjective* because his bosses had determined that his opinions were worth sharing.

Ultimately, the notion that anyone can write criticism is a myth. Not everyone is knowledgeable enough, writes English well enough, brings to it enough passion or has the time to do the necessary research.

Debate and Creativity

A readable critique should be only the start of a stimulating debate and a piece of creative writing in its own right. Above all, it must be approached responsibly because it directly impacts people's lives. Artistic endeavor—good or bad—deserves a smart, careful assessment. So does the reader. There's no question that good critics are still there and still writing, but they're harder to find in the oceans of mediocrity sloshing around.

In a keynote address for a National Endowment Arts Institute at USC's program for critics *The New Yorker's* John Lahr offered this:

"Our culture is a whispering gallery of opinion. A sort of indiscriminate and indiscriminating cultural gas has settled over the land, and certainly over theatrical discussion. A sort of cultural static. Braying and blurring and numbing... It seems to me that we're at this very moment, through this sort of blur of the whispering gallery, at a place that [Alexander] Pope described in 'The Dunciad,' where the den of opinion is kind of a universal right.

Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor'd;

Light dies before thy uncreating word:

Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;

And universal Darkness buries All."

Ouch. But then you read some of that intelligent *New York Times* exchange mentioned at the top of this piece and wonder:

"For professional arts criticism to survive the challenges presented by the technology-driven democratization of media platforms," wrote Jeremy Barker of Culturebot.org, a New York City-based Web site covering contemporary performance, "it's essential that critics... serve as engaged, accessible writers, whose work helps audiences navigate the intersection of art, culture, politics and economics. As the arts evolve, we must develop new frameworks for real criticism that reflect this interdisciplinary, hyperlinked, hybrid world."

So are we looking at the collapse of standards or the birth of a brave new meritocracy? That's the hopeful part. But Barker goes on: "The need for serious criticism is greater than ever, but all we seem to get—whether from professionals or amateurs—is more reviews and opinions."

Ouch again. Is a meritocracy coming in some striking new form perhaps...? A healthy, dare I say it, elitism? Here's what actor Alfred Molina had to say about that much-maligned word: "You're never complimented for being elite; you're actually accused of being elitist.... But the truth is, originally it meant something else. It meant wanting to achieve and create the best of something, the very best you could possibly do..."

It still does. We need more elitist critics, not fewer.

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