

Keynote address: “Theater as an Alternate Space”

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Thank you so much for asking me to be here. To be honest, I had to laugh when Sasha Anawalt called and asked me if I would like to address this distinguished group, because like most artists, I have an innate terror of critics (as you will recall, when Didi wants to absolutely silence Gogo with the worst insult he can imagine in *WAITING FOR GODOT*, he hisses out the word “CRITIC!”, and that effectively ends the debate). Like all artists, I remember every word of every bad review I have ever received, and very little about any of the good ones. However, now more than ever, interchange between critics and artists is critical, as each of us in our own disciplines faces a wildly changing marketplace and huge uncertainty about the role of our own work within the culture. Just as you all are struggling to come to terms with what journalism is going to be in the post-print media age, we in the theater are struggling to understand how and whether live performance as we know it will continue to survive in an era of TiVO and instant messaging. So how we move the dialogue forward is a crucial and collective endeavor.

Daily journalism is difficult enough, but writing in a sophisticated way about the theater on a three-hour deadline is herculean. I began to think about this in earnest when I visited my daughter at Harvard this fall. She is a freshman and her fondest dream is to write for the *CRIMSON*. So, in true Harvard spirit, she has had to “comp”, or “compete” for a spot. Of the six areas one can “comp” at the *CRIMSON*, one is arts journalism, and I asked her immediately why she hadn’t chosen that, instead of news. After all, this was a child who grew up sleeping in a dressing room at the Classic Stage Company in New York while Harold Pinter sat in the rehearsal room with me arguing the finer points of his blistering and terrifying first play *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*. This was a child who learned to dress up and raise money for A.C.T.’s capital campaign before she was five, and who starred as the Toy Cat in *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* when she was ten. “Write about the arts?” she asked in astonishment. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Where to begin? What must you bring to the table? How do you educate yourself to engage in the huge and slippery dialogue that is arts criticism,

particularly when the field is changing so rapidly? How and to whom should your opinion matter? How do you reduce three hours of potentially transformative art into three hundred words? Are you expected to be an advocate or an adversary? Insider or outsider? Analyst or advertiser? You are writing theater criticism in Spokane, or Cincinnati, or Dallas. How are you expected to relate to what is going on in the larger theatrical universe?

You are a remarkable group with extremely diverse backgrounds, so for some of you writing for the theater is already second nature and for others it is a relatively new endeavor. Last year this group had the privilege of listening to a distinguished drama critic, John Lahr, anatomize the difference between a “critic” and a “cricket”. One of John’s themes was that good critics are people who come from the theater and are, in some real way, “of” the theater. I’m not sure I entirely agree: one of the best critics of poetry I know is my extraordinary mother Marjorie Perloff, who is in the audience tonight, and one of the few things she is *not* is a practicing poet. What she IS is a fearless advocate, a relentlessly close reader, and a profound contextualizer. So for those of you who came to drama criticism without actually having been on stage, don’t despair. The most critical tool you can bring to your discipline is HOW TO WATCH. And this is much more difficult than it may seem. With what eyes are you viewing the production at hand?

Given that I am not a critic, but a practicing theater artist, I can only be honest about what I *wish* theater criticism aspired to, and what aspects of current critical practice give me cause for concern. I’d also like to talk a little about recent trends in the field and how one might respond to them. But first, a few myths to debunk. There is still a prevailing notion that as a critic you are there to be an “objective” viewer. Such a person does not exist. If you’re going to buy a new car, you find out everything you can about that car before you even step onto the lot. A restaurant critic has scoured the menu and researched the chef long before he or she steps in to a new restaurant. Why should it be any different with theater? To quote Harold Clurman in his wonderful *THE FERVENT YEARS*: “It is precisely in his independence, humility, and freedom that the reviewer’s evil lurks. For he cannot be held to anything, he represents nothing definite, he has no intellectual identity; his mind is a private affair, and his change of mind may be an accident.” One of the beauties of theater is its ability to take us to cultures, time frames and emotional zones that we had not previously

experienced, to broaden our horizons and our expectations. As with any journey, much of the enjoyment lies in the preparation. Just as one would not arrive in a new town without a roadmap and expect to find one's way around, it makes little sense to go see a play without attempting to find out something about its author, its historical context, about the artists performing it and the venue presenting it. One of the great advantages of our technological age is that it's so easy to find out what you need to know: nearly every non-profit theater now has a web site filled with information about the productions it offers, and it takes very little ingenuity to inform oneself before arriving at the performance. It is not *wrong* to know these things in advance; in fact, it is absolutely your right as a critic to ask for a script before you see a show, although for some critics this is less useful than reading other background material. At my own theater, we have created a publication called WORDS ON PLAYS which is filled with juicy interviews with the creative team, wonderful historical photos and analysis, a synopsis of the play, and other lively information. Our audience reads this assiduously, our critics usually do not. Which frequently means that our audience is better informed about our work than the press. This is depressing, given that audiences look to the press to help them understand what they have seen, or might be seeing, in the theater. One can say that this is easier for an audience, who is only seeing five or six plays a year, than for a theater critic who may be covering multiple plays in a week. And certainly when you are on deadline and over-extended, you have to be efficient about your preparation. But there is no excuse not to do it.

While it is necessary to inform oneself in advance about the performance, it is also useful to have a clear sense of one's own predilections and biases, and to be honest about them. Each of us views a work of art through a particular lens, and it is difficult to erase our own preconceptions. As Harold Clurman has written in The Divine Pastime: "Who is the "I" that speaks? Why should his assertion carry any particular weight? For him to assert any decisive influence over me, should I not take the measure of the man, learn something of his intrinsic qualifications, his human disposition, his beliefs, his personal complexion?" There is something disturbing about an opinion being rendered by a totally anonymous human being; better to acknowledge one's own limitations and preconceptions, and then proceed with the analysis. We often don't even realize how particular our own lens is until we realize how other people react to work that we value, or visa versa: Americans are always surprised at how many of their favorite plays meet with incomprehension when they travel abroad (comedy is particularly hard

to export), women artists often feel that the preponderance of male critics mitigates against an understanding of their work, and so on. Openness to the new is crucial for a theater critic. Not just to the new script, but to the new interpretation, the new artist, the new way of producing. Remember that your job as a critic is to *extend the conversation* that the production engenders, not to stop that conversation dead in its tracks. You are part of the future of the art form. Many of you are writing in smaller markets in which you most likely see a mix of revivals, a few classical plays, and some new or relatively new work. You are under no obligation to admire a play because it has received the imprimatur of the New York Times or because it has had a successful run on Broadway. You *are* under an obligation to help an audience frame what you have seen, to try to understand why it might matter and what it might mean.

This is often hard to tease out: a promising script can be marred by weak performances, a dazzling set design can overwhelm a classical interpretation, etc. Theater is a collaboration between a wide variety of artists, each of whom has brought something to the mix in a given production. The responsibility for the production as a whole always comes down to the director, but it is useful to remember that every move in a production, every light cue, every physical gesture, every piece of scenery, every note of music, every costume, represents a *choice*. Assume that many people actually thought about those choices, that what you are seeing is not random but is actually intentional. Ask yourself, what was the intention? How does each choice function within the context of the whole piece? Why was that actor cast? Why was that speech delivered from such a great distance? Why was the stage so dark? The making of theater is a *process*: try to get inside the minds of those who were engaged in the process. Remember that a script is just a blueprint for production, so if you do choose to read a new play before you review it, or reread a classic, be careful that what you are actually reviewing when you see the production is how the work is manifested in real time on stage, and not how it felt to you in your living room when you read it. Shakespeare's TITUS ANDRONICUS can be riveting or laughable depending upon the production: once you have familiarized yourself with the text, see how that text has been filtered through the imaginations of these particular artists. As a reader, I always find it useful to try separate what the critic is saying about the *play* from his or her evaluation of the *production*: if, for example, the critic finds the writing to be strong and fresh, a potential audience member might choose to excuse the fact that the acting is less-than-inspired. Conversely, no matter how spectacular the set or electric the

acting, if the script itself is incoherent, audiences might pause. The more clearly you explore the component parts that made up the evening, the more fairly your readers can draw conclusions for themselves. With a classical play, it is easier to evaluate the contributions of the interpretive artists because the script is well known, whereas with a new play it is much more challenging, particularly because what you say about the play will be forever linked to its initial reception.

Because of this, I always wish critics would spend less time taking notes and more time just *watching the stage*: if something is important, it will remain with you later that night or the next morning when you set out to write about it. If you've forgotten something crucial, call the theater and ask; they'll be only too thrilled to supply the missing information! Be an audience member, experience the other audience members, try to be part of the process, even if you must be there on that most fraught of occasions, "opening night". (Opening nights are usually deadly because the auditorium is filled with critics, whose heads are down much of the time and whose reactions are, at best, muted. Nervous actors, trying to compensate for the silence emanating from the house, tend to work far too hard on opening nights and the result is often the most forced and least alive performance of the run. And alas, it's the only one you see!) Invite a reader to truly see what you have seen. As Eric Bentley has written, "Nothing a critic has can open your eyes except his own eyes: he says look! And you look. Which sounds gratuitous but is not. For you had failed to look, or had not looked with sufficient concentration and discrimination. A good critic will get you to do so."

Equally important is to remember that *producing* is an art form in itself. Many of you regularly review theater at regional theaters or small non-profits that exist within very particular communities. If you are the theater critic, you are a part of that community (whether you like it or not!). That doesn't mean you should socialize with the actors after the show or get to know the artistic director personally. It does mean you have an obligation to review the work within the context of that theater in that town, and to understand that it is part of a larger body of work. What those of us who run theaters long for is a critic who will put a given production in *context* rather than merely opining about the show itself. Ask yourself, why did this theater choose this particular play at this particular time? How does it fit into their aesthetic as a whole? If you feel the theater has no clear aesthetic, that the play selections are random or incoherent, that is fair game to write about: a good non-profit should be able to articulate its mission and play selections

with clarity, and a good critic should be covering more than individual shows, he/she should be covering the entire season, in the context of other seasons. You should be aware enough of what is happening nationally to know whether the work you are seeing is generic or unusual, whether there are trends in the field that are being totally ignored, whether the local community is engaged in the work, whether the theater is constantly trying to raise the artistic bar or is settling for mediocrity. And in this regard, you must be able to assess *risk*. If a theater does a season that consists of DOUBT, PROOF, MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM and A CHRISTMAS CAROL, they may be doing beautiful work but their level of risk is relatively low. If a theater is producing lesser known classics, or international work, or untested new plays, their level of risk is considerably higher. This doesn't mean that risk is the only value, but it is *a* value, and critics rarely recognize it. Theaters should be encouraged to venture outside of predictable programming, to help lay the tracks for the future of the art form. But if critics don't reward them for that, by understanding the broader context and the risk involved instead of merely evaluating the show as a once-off, audiences will be less likely to embrace more difficult work.

This is why it is so crucial that you stay open to *complexity*, and to difference. It is less important to "get" a piece of theater than to experience it fully. Good theater is not an essay, it doesn't exist to make a point, it exists as a parallel universe which we enter in to as if into a new country. When theater critics first saw the work of Robert Wilson (who has created such memorable theatrical creations as EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH and THE BLACK RIDER), they derided it as slow and pretentious and dull. Slowly, audiences began to realize that in Wilson's universe, *time* has different proportions. Watching his work forces you to slow down, to stop waiting for plot to happen or character to emerge, and to experience life unfolding in a visceral and beautiful way. If you are willing to do that, the experience can be extraordinary. If not, it is meaningless. A good critic can help an audience re-calibrate expectations. When the work of Samuel Beckett was first performed in Paris, it was also greeted with incomprehension and boredom: it took a few visionary critics to realize that his work required a different way of seeing, a different standard of criticism. As for Harold Pinter, if it hadn't been for the great Harold Hobson in the Sunday Times, who recognized the savage hilarity of THE BIRTHDAY PARTY as a landmark in the British theater, that play (which closed after six performances) would have disappeared in the wake of universally hateful reviews. Be the critic who dares to differ! Even today, we are so seduced by television realism that

we fail to realize that there are multiple ways to tell a story, that plot is not always the central driver, and that predictable laughs are not a measure of success.

As an example, I collaborate frequently with Tom Stoppard, whose plays traffic mostly in *ideas*. He is the first to admit that plot is not his strong suit; indeed even his *characters* exist in service to a dialect of ideas that he is playing out in his head. So with Stoppard's work, you have to be attuned to the wild interplays of contradictory thought, and to the vivid language and irony that envelops those ideas. If you're watching for story-line, you're out of luck. With Pinter it is the opposite: there is nothing intellectual about Pinter's work, it is totally visceral. You can't watch a play like **THE BIRTHDAY PARTY** and ask conventional questions about its characters, because characters in Pinter have no past and no future, they are oblique, elusive and filled with secrets, which is why they are so fascinating. With Pinter's work, you have to look at the event as it is unfolding, the deep levels of violence, sexuality and menace that well up from the almost archetypal encounters on the stage. His is a whole other world, requiring a different road map and set of expectations. If you are then confronted with the early plays of, say, Suzan-Lori Parks, you have yet a third landscape to navigate: the coded language and behavior of African-Americans who have inherited a violent history and an outsider's sense of humor. Be prepared to witness a black Abraham Lincoln holding forth in a fun fair booth. To get inside what she is saying about history, about the perversion of language, about identity, you have to submit to the fun-fair logic of her theatrical universe. It's your job to figure out: *what are the rules of this particular theatrical game?* Only then can you decide if they are being realized successfully.

Most of all, I truly believe that if you are a lover of theater, it's important to champion work that is inherently "theatrical". We are not in the business of television or film, as much as we would love to receive the paychecks associated with those media. We are theater-makers. At its roots, theater has always been conceived as a multidisciplinary art form: from Greek tragedy to Kabuki to kathakali, theater combined dance, music, poetry, debate, in one unifying whole. It is only with the advent of nineteenth century realism that theater became "conversation": people sitting on couches in conventional living rooms, talking about their lives. Watch out for television plays masquerading as theater! Look for plays in which the language wakes you up, makes you listen, toys with ideas, explodes with sound. Look for theater pieces that incorporate other art forms (theater was always

interdisciplinary!) Some of the most interesting theater today is searching out ways to combine different disciplines on stage: at ACT we are creating a new piece with ballet dancers from SF Ballet, and asking composer Tracy Chapman to create songs for Athol Fugard's THE BLOOD KNOT. All across the country, theater artists are teaming up with composers and choreographers to create "fusion" pieces of theater: from the troupe THE CIVILIANS, which originated in San Diego and uses songs and found language to create witty pastiches about contemporary life, to Philadelphia's Pig Iron Theater that is based in vaudeville and clowning, to Minneapolis' Theatre de la Jeune Lune that re-invents classical plays in an extreme physical landscape, to Ma-Yi Theater that takes stories of Filipino origins and combines them with music and dance to create plays like MAGNO RUBIO. Of course, great classical theater has always incorporated elements of many disciplines: there are masques and songs in Shakespeare, incredible ballads and pageants in Brecht, insane and hilarious ballets in Moliere. Every time one of these plays is re-explored, new possibilities emerge. Seek these out. Encourage them. It is our collective responsibility to remember that theater is actually a muscular and evolving art form, not a commercial endeavor.

You are in this room because the National Endowment for the Arts decided that it was important to support your growth and education as writers about the theater, just as in 1968 when the NEA was founded, it was a strongly held belief that the arts deserved to have support that lay outside the commercial arena in order to ensure its future. While lack of real subsidy is an enormous risk for the American theater, the countervailing risk, which is the relentless drumbeat of commercialism, is even greater. Unlike opera, ballet and classical music, theater suffers from being the art form that has a commercial correlate. This is corrosive to experimentation, to real training, and to the growth of the art form. Think about it from a critic's point of view. If you are asked to review a dance concert, for example, you inherently understand that whether you're talking about New York City Ballet or Savion Glover's tap dancing, live dance is a coterie art form with a long and distinguished history requiring enormous craft, training, subsidy and infrastructure. The same can certainly be said for opera, and for classical music. But theater in America is viewed through a different lens. Because there is such a thing as commercial theater, which by now mainly exists to entertain non-English-speaking tourists in Disney-owned theaters in Manhattan, it is relentlessly difficult to persuade both audiences and critics that theater is an art form equal to dance, opera and classical music, that is

deserves subsidy and support, that it requires enormous craft and training to reach its heights, and that it can be hugely significant culturally even if it doesn't move to Broadway and "recoup its investment." Because theater traffics in words and characters and seemingly real situations, unlike dance, let us say, which traffics in abstraction, formal structure, and highly crafted physical life, the assumption is that anyone can do theater and anyone can write about it.

This assumption is exacerbated by the casting practices of Hollywood, in which people who have never acted are suddenly granted their own sit coms because they look right or because they have a following in another medium (sports, modeling, cooking, you name it) and might draw an audience. This is not *acting*, it is appearing before a camera. Great acting for the stage is transformational. It asks an artist to use his or her imagination and physical instrument to inhabit another character. In order to do that, years of training are required: an actor needs physical expressivity, vocal range, dialect skills, intellectual understanding of complex texts, emotional range, stamina and huge courage. Great actors lose themselves in a role and fully inhabit it at the same time. They don't simply play themselves, they don't require body mikes to be heard, they don't deliver the same performance night after night ; they remain alive to every action occurring on stage and they reinvent the role nightly before our eyes. The disaster of the commercial theater is that transformational acting has little value, because what is being sold to an audience is the *commodity of celebrity*, that which the audience already recognizes and is willing to pay for. So Broadway producers cast the hapless Ashley Judd as Maggie in CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF or the rap star P. Diddy as the lead in A RAISIN IN THE SUN, in the hopes that regardless of their acting talent (or lack thereof), their presence will guarantee an audience. What never seems to occur to these producers is that once that audience arrives, they expect to see something worthwhile (particularly because they are paying over \$100 a ticket). If they don't, they won't return, no matter how famous the celebrity. This is the death of the theater.

When a theater asks its audience to leave home, pay an exorbitant amount of money, drive to its venue, pay to park, and sit through two hours plus of a play, it better be presenting something that its audience couldn't see more easily and far more cheaply by staying home and watching television. This is why I believe more and more that, rather than replicating other media, live theater needs to provide an *alternative space*, a place where time slows down, where complexity is allowed to emerge, where cultures collide, and

where we resist being interrupted every three minutes by our IPODS, our email, our outside lives. In a fascinating report by the Getty Leadership Institute of a convening last spring of which Sasha Anawalt was a part, the discussion revolved around the degree to which live performance is at risk in a culture of Netflix, iTunes and “culture on demand”. We live in a world of niche marketing in which any tune is available at the click of iTunes and any television show can be accessed at any time just by setting your TIVO correctly (no small challenge, admittedly...) You never have to read any news you don’t choose to read, you just seek out the headlines you want on-line. So how can we expect audiences to turn up at 8 p.m. on a given Tuesday to sit through three hours of, say, HEDDA GABLER? How are we to persuade the next generation that such an experience has any relevance to their lives? This is one of the glories of being a critic, to do that persuasion, when you believe a play or performance merits it.

I wish there were a way to “brand” the experience of “liveness” that comes with actually showing up to a play. After all, it works in sports. If you’re a tennis nut, you are really much better off watching the US Open on television, where that tiny ball is inches away and the oppressive humidity of Queens in August is not an issue. Yet thousands of people fight to see the matches *live*, because the visceral experience of being there is unforgettable. Theater is *immersive*. How do we describe to audiences what it feels like to be amongst the audience when the actors in JULIUS CAESAR are debating their political future, or the sad clowns in GODOT are desperately waiting for enlightenment? Half of the fun of being there is watching how other people react, realizing that the emotions you are experiencing are being experienced at exactly the same time by people who may be radically different from you in every way except that they too have chosen to spend their evening at that particular play. What you find funny, the young couple next to you might find appalling. That’s part of the experience. It used to be that lining up to buy tickets was part of the experience as well—while you waited, you chatted, you inquired, you discovered things about the play you were about to spend money on. Now all of that is gone. Most people buy their tickets on-line and turn up with precious little idea of what it is that they are going to see. Hence the producers’ desire to package the production in such a way that it will feel familiar: familiar actors, familiar title, familiar themes. But great theater defamiliarizes. It wakes us up, forces us to see the familiar in a new way. At the same time, it puts language to feelings we have had over and over again, it reminds us that we are part of a web of humanity that has been caught up in the same conflicts and delights for thousands of

years. And it does that in a *safe space*, a space where people who might otherwise have little in common feel free to be amused, to be outraged, to be moved, to be made vulnerable. If it is true that the first thing one grabs in a fire are the family photos, theater can be viewed as the collective family photos of the culture. If we leave it behind, we have lost a precious part of ourselves, our narrative, our cultural history. So the attention given to a play is a sacred act—and the fact that an audience has committed to being somewhere for several hours on a given night is a gift that no theater artist, and no theater, critic, should ever take for granted.