

Reimagining Theatre Criticism

by Nikki Shaffeullah

I have been invited to contribute to conversations on theatre criticism a few times now, and each time the request provokes a reaction in me that falls somewhere between mild confusion and imposter syndrome: *What on earth does theatre criticism have to do with me?* I eventually realize that the invitation relates to my role as Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage*¹—a theatre magazine exploring the intersections of politics, social activism, cultural plurality, and the performing arts—so perhaps the reason for the request is obvious: theatre magazines are a site for *theatre criticism*, and inviting me and *alt.theatre* into the conversation is a way to incorporate an equity-focused perspective. However, when I am pressed to consider theatre criticism through an equity-focused lens, I realize not only how little I associate the practice with the work we do at *alt.theatre* but also that magazines like *alt.theatre* are healthily antithetical to theatre criticism.

The characteristics of mainstream theatre criticism that have left me disinterested in and disconnected from it stand in clear contrast to the qualities that drew me to and keep me invested in spaces like *alt.theatre*. When I think about the business of theatre reviews (which is not often), I think of the very limited roles at media outlets that are given to people with considerable privilege, who occupy those roles for a very long time, and whose reviews are restricted by internally and externally imposed parameters that sometimes manifest as low tolerance for artistic risk and cultural difference. Spaces like *alt.theatre*, on the other hand, have at their centre an understanding that artistic excellence and risk are culturally constructed, and thus how they are defined varies widely. Half the time, the things that I'm seeing, or am interested in seeing, are not even on the table for mainstream reviews: indie theatre, community-engaged art projects, queer cabarets, puppetry jams, experimental improv, things that might have short runs, things that might be free, things that might not even brand themselves as theatre. Theatre reviews do not impact what I choose to see or not see; how I observe or analyze patterns and shifts in the Canadian theatre landscape; which artists I want to follow, support, or collaborate with; or what I think is good or bad theatre. What *does* influence my performance-going are the *Facebook* posts, tweets, and blog entries of my friends and colleagues—I'm interested in the

wider picture of what the theatre community (including artists, arts workers, researchers, and those who are none of the above) is saying, and in mapping out who is saying what.

And so I really do find it curious when I am, or *alt.theatre* is, invited into conversations about the practice of theatre criticism. For me, *alt.theatre*, along with perhaps other theatre magazines such as *Canadian Theatre Review* or *Jeu*, lives in a different realm. *alt.theatre* makes itself into a meeting place where people with all kinds of authority—legitimized by institutions and/or their communities, mainstream reviews and/or underground reputations, their awards and CVs and/or their lived experiences—can situate themselves together in conversation. It's exciting to publish emerging artists alongside senior theatre scholars. It's this diversity of perspectives that feeds the Canadian theatre ecology, and so of course we should hear these voices speak, not just onstage, but also via offstage platforms. It's valuable to have one space where you can hear young artists exploring their curiosities and established artists reflecting on patterns in their careers; where researchers can connect ideas presented by art to broader social movements, and where practitioners can reflect on their emerging methodologies.

Furthermore, while mainstream theatre reviews tend to support the status quo of theatre creation, *alt.theatre* was as much born out of an equity movement as it was from a desire for a space for artistic conversation. It was a creation of Teesri Duniya Theatre, a company founded in Montreal in 1981 with a mission to create and present socially and politically relevant theatre based on the cultural experiences of diverse communities. *alt.theatre* was developed the following decade in service of the same themes—to create an archive of politically engaged and culturally diverse theatre in Canada, and to analyze and share ideas about socially and politically relevant theatre based on the cultural experiences of diverse communities—art and themes that are often relegated to the margins of society. *alt.theatre* was created to fill a gap in theatre discourse created by mainstream theatre criticism and other similar institutions. I am interested in theatre magazines and other kinds of theatre writing that reflect on the genealogy of theatrical pieces, discuss methodologies, survey the state of fields of

practice, profile new artists and projects, and track and analyze social issues onstage and off.

What would socially engaged, culturally responsive, and inclusive theatre criticism look like?

But I am also wondering: how could theatre criticism become something that is interesting to someone like me? What would socially engaged, culturally responsive, and inclusive theatre criticism look like?

I know the conversations about what culturally responsive and/or inclusive *theatre* could look like—those are discussions that our artistic communities are having with increasing frequency and depth, and I'm heartened to observe that our collective literacy is improving around questions of, for example, racial and cultural equity in theatre. In these conversations I've observed that there are multiple layers of analysis. Usually, the first layer is talking about representation through colour-blind casting: how the big houses should cast more non-white (i.e., Black, Indigenous, people of colour) actors. Following that is an unpacking of what these roles are—is it progress if we just have non-white Romeos and Juliets but continue to program, produce, and elevate theatre coming from the Western canon, as well as new theatre that falls within white and Western forms, traditions, and standards of artistry? That leads to questions about diversity in other creative roles, particularly ones with more storytelling power—how can we have more diversity among the directors, playwrights, designers, and others working at theatres, particularly in the big houses that occupy a majority of the funding and resources? From there we start to ask about the validity of big houses being the big ones at all, and how the distribution of resources can uphold or subvert the status quo of inequity. How can we better support and empower artistic organizations that are led by artists from marginalized experiences or are otherwise constrained by inequities in the theatre industry? How can big and small theatres share resources and redistribute power? What modes of creation and models of work do we value, fund, or even accept as theatre? How much does the process of creating a culturally responsive and inclusive theatre ecology involve exploding the definitions of what theatre can be?

How can these questions inform us in pushing the boundaries of what theatre *criticism* can be? What could the framework be for building a culture of theatre reviewing that can really respond to risk and difference?

I first want to unpack the necessary skills of the theatre critic. We must dismiss any presumption that any one party—artist, scholar, critic-by-trade—is an inherently more capable audience member than another. Theatre critics do not have an inherent ability to detect tannins and notes of oak where the rest of us do not. I *do* believe that the critic can offer the wider theatre community a great deal in how they analyze productions. A theatre critic friend once explained to me that he enters his practice guided by three questions: What did the show set out to do? Did it achieve that goal? And what does it contribute to theatre and society at large? I really like this framework, as it makes space for the fact

that artistic merit is a culturally normative construct; that what we consider good or bad theatre is very much informed by whether we grew up in a culture that valued minimalism or maximalism, if our family movie nights consisted of Jean-Luc Godard or Bollywood or Rogers and Hammerstein. It also means that a particular piece can be reviewed considering not only a wider artistic context, but many artistic contexts, and how those artistic contexts fit into the world more broadly. It allows the possibility for artistic merit to be somewhat informed by social merit.

In addition, the theatre critic cannot be so alienated by the presence of difference that their work becomes about assessing the place or validity of that difference in the given show. If a play is about an immigrant's journey to self-actualization, then what should be scrutinized is how the play performed that journey of self-actualization, not the fact of the character's immigrantness. There is this bias among some theatre writers in positions of social privilege that art about identity (i.e., marginalized identities—being an immigrant, or Indigenous, or a person of colour, or queer, or trans, or a person with a disability, or a woman) is simplistic and unworthy theatre. I read this bias in reviews, and I hear it from some in the theatre community (usually white, often male). Consequently, they overread this abstract problem of identity politics into art: they read a marginalized identity as a genre; they assume a marginalized identity is intended to be in and of itself a source of dramatic conflict; or they simply fixate on a character's marginalized identity at the expense of their stories, or other elements such as the production's design, direction, and so on. Theatre criticism is at its strongest when it avoids assumptions about what the art should be but lets the art itself dictate the lens through which it is analyzed.

Another layer I'm puzzling through is how theatre criticism could do a better job of working with politically and socially engaged art. To explore this issue I reflect on activism and consciousness-shifting in general. Take, for example, earlier in this article when I outlined the stages of questioning that surround discussions of cultural diversity in theatre. The extent to which those in theatre engage with those questions depends on a variety of factors, including one's experience, identity, and access to and familiarity with these kinds of conversations. Reflecting on my own trajectory in understanding different planes of social activism, I know I've moved through various stages. I was preoccupied with colour-blind casting as a tactic of racial equity in theatre until I considered how colour-blind casting still supports the status quo of producing plays from the white Western canon—at its worst, a tool to contain difference and hold it up as diversity. As a teenager I thought it was effective anti-racism to teach white Canadians at my high school about Ramadan and Hanukkah, but now I think it's also helpful to challenge the prison industrial complex and settler-colonial state. My trajectory with anti-racism is being informed by many things along the way, challenges and privileges, including both my ongoing lived experiences as a queer person of colour, and my access to educational resources as a middle-class settler. But that's my trajectory, and I think it's potentially counter to social progress to hold up one's own history of understanding social issues as a map that others should follow. I know I have done a lot of work and thinking around these questions but also have a lot to learn, and the world is always shifting, and so I want to be both rigorous and gentle, with myself and with others, when

engaging with social issues. So, how can theatre critics review a show with politically engaged content, while accounting for the various places that the artists who have created it, the audiences who are watching it, and they themselves are at?

Theatre reviewers best serve their work when they foreground in their analysis of a politically engaged show the question of who it is meant to speak to. Really, this is an important skill for all of us: critics, scholars, artists, audiences. I know that when we make shows at least part of our goal is to put bums in seats—to satisfy our producers, make some money to survive. What does it, or would it, look like when theatremakers really consider who their politically engaged work is meant for when creating and marketing it? What if we really framed some kinds of theatre as an artistic kind of political action, as opposed to a political kind of art? How would that shape spectatorship? How would that impact criticism? And what would enable us to do this re-framing? Part of the reason that I am able to champion this perspective is that most of my artistic practice is in community-engaged arts and arts mentorship (at present, through my work as Artistic Director of the AMY Project and as Assistant Artistic Director of Jumblies Theatre²), and those practices tend to be funded by arts councils as social services—that is, without the same expectations of box office revenues, which allows us to be more socially and politically engaged in creation processes, forms, and content. There are wider

structural and economic constraints that disable mainstream theatre from being as intentionally political as it could be, and so a politically engaged reimagining of theatre and criticism must also include a reimagining of the capitalistic systems imposed on them.

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I had one funny theatregoing week in Toronto in the fall of 2015 when I saw three plays that each, in turn, dealt with a social issue that was personally resonant to me: the Theatre Centre's production of Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884–1915* and its exploration of colonial history and present-day racism; Theatre Why Not's production of Jordan Tannahill's *Late Company*, about homophobic bullying and suicide; and Nightwood Theatre's production of Yaël Farber's *Nirbhaya*,

(l-r): Rosemary Dunsmore, Richard Greenblatt, John Cleland, Fiona Highet, and Liam Sullivan in Jordan Tannahill's *Late Company*, produced by Why Not Theatre at the Theatre Centre in November 2015.

Photo by Dahlia Katz, courtesy of Why Not Theatre, theatrewhynot.org



about sexual assault in India, which incorporated real experiences from the lives of the performers. These plays were all strong, affecting productions that moved something in me. They were all absolutely intentionally political in the way they addressed racism, homophobia, and misogyny, respectively. I appreciated a great deal about the potential political impact of these plays—they made visible various stories and conversations that do not always get a lot of light, and they probably contributed to many audience members reflecting on the ways they could change their own behaviours. But despite what I appreciated about these plays and my enjoyment of seeing them, I didn't feel that their political offerings were intended for me.

Specifically, the dramatic mechanisms of *We Are Proud to Present* moved the audience into thinking about race in a visceral way. At the climax of the show, a white actor playing a white character (playing a white character) hurls racist joke after racist joke into the audience while his Black colleague playing a Black character stands by until he snaps and breaks down. The power of this moment is in the blurred theatricality: a white actor playing a white character (playing a white character) telling racist jokes is in part a performance, but, really, the audience experience of it is being in a room where a white person is yelling racist joke after racist joke. At some point it stops being theatre, and that's what makes it so unsettling—and politically impactful—for the audience. I see a lot of intense theatre, and race is a salient part of my work and life, but I found this scene particularly upsetting. I

thought it was effective and meaningful and powerful, but as soon as the show was ending I had the rare experience of realizing I would rather not have experienced it. Who needs that kind of experience? People who routinely experience racialization, or those who do not? I went to see the show with a friend who is also a person of colour, and the ushers escorted us to specific (unassigned) seats around the thrust stage. At the end of the show, I realized that everyone in the audience who was non-white-passing had been seated at the sides of the thrust, while all of the white-passing audience members were seated directly in front of the stage. I wondered if this was intentional, if the production was considering who the play was meant to impact—if it took seriously the line between emotional stirring and retraumatizing—and structured the audience experience accordingly. Similarly, *Nirbhaya* was both profound and exhausting owing to its discussion and depiction of sexual assault. In terms of consciousness-shifting, I know that those who would most benefit from a deepened understanding of sexual assault and misogyny in Indian culture are probably not Indian women, but in this case, with the knowledge that the stories onstage were the stories of the actors playing them, I, as an Indo-Guyanese-Canadian woman, felt a connection to the characters, and a sense of solidarity rather than alienation. *Late Company* is explicitly about homophobia but seems distinctly intended for a non-queer audience, as it centres on the perspectives of non-queer characters and (as Tannahill freely admits) is crafted in the form of the traditional “well-made play,” packaged for mainstream consumption.

(clockwise from left): Brendan McMurtry-Howlett, Michael Ayres, Brett Donahue, and Marcel Stewart in Jackie Sibbles Drury's *We Are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884–1915*, produced by the Theatre Centre in November 2015.
Photo by Dahlia Katz, courtesy of the Theatre Centre



(top): Brett Donahue, (bottom, l-r): Brendan McMurtry-Howlett, Michael Ayres, Khadijah Roberts-Abdullahin, Marcel Stewart, and Darcy Gerhart in Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We Are Proud to Present*, produced by the Theatre Centre in November 2015. Photo by Dahlia Katz, courtesy of the Theatre Centre



I believe these questions about audience and intention are important for all of us when entering into politically engaged storytelling, in any role. It certainly enhances the audience experience when artists consider what intellectual and emotional experience they are crafting through their work, for whom, and what political imperative it serves. The theatre critic must also consider these angles before beginning to analyze how the social and political motives served the art, how the art served the social and political motives, who and what it seemed to want to speak to, and where the critic themselves, as an audience member, is situated in that context.

Theatre criticism as a practice does not seem to be much in the habit of tasking critics to consider how the particularities of their own social location manifest in their work—and I suspect that in our neo-liberal context, such community-minded disclaimers would risk being seen as a sign of weak journalism. But I propose that this kind of framework is the kind of thoughtfulness that might be necessary for culturally responsive and inclusive theatre criticism. I do want theatre criticism to exist alongside all the other kinds of theatre discourse that I'm passionate about. I welcome a landscape that includes theatre writing that brings together myriad perspectives—including reviewers—in culturally responsive and inclusive ways.

Notes

- 1 When I was first invited to contribute to this issue of *Canadian Theatre Review* I was Editor-in-Chief of *alt.theatre*, a role I held since 2012. In spring 2016, I moved on from the job but continue to stay involved with *alt.theatre* as an editorial board member.
- 2 The Artists Mentoring Youth Project (the AMY Project) is a Toronto-based theatre mentorship program for young women and non-binary youth: theamyproject.com. Jumblies Theatre is an interdisciplinary community arts company that works in Toronto and across Canada: jumbliestheatre.org.

About the Author

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