

CRITICS (2)

by Joe Hanrahan (again)

Setting is two chairs - facing audience -
one stage left, one stage right
separated by about 2 feet, as if there's
an aisle in the middle of an audience,
and they both have aisle seats.

Critic SHE is stage left, Critic HE stage right.
Both have small notebooks, pens.

They are intently watching the conclusion
of the first act. HE is on the edge of his seat.
Nodding. Slight shakes of head. Murmurs.
SHE sits up straight, but has a neutral,
if not skeptical demeanor.
SHE glances discreetly at his antics.

They watch for almost a minute. The first act ends.
SHE begins to clap politely. HE lowers his head,
head in hands, stays down a bit, shakes it.
SHE glances over.

HE abruptly leaps to his feet, applauding wildly.
SHE glances over again.

HE: YES! YES! BRAVO! YES! YES!

SHE glances over again.
HE turns to her a couple of times,
encouraging her to join in the
hurrah. SHE smiles politely.
His applause slows, stops, as
he looks over crowd looking for
appreciation/affirmation, then is a
bit embarrassed by his outburst.
SHE stands, getting ready to walk
into the lobby.

HE: I'm sorry. I just got a bit...
overwhelmed. That final moment.
And this was just the first act!

(SHE nods, HE sits)

HE: Oh I love this, don't you?
(dramatic pause)
Intermission.

SHE: I sure do.

HE: Most people wander out. For a coke. Or, the bathroom. But I just love...
I call this the Critics Cove.
(HE holds his hands over his head, like a veil).
It's just you...
and a few people who won't go to the lobby.

And it gets quiet. Maybe some of the crew come out, and change some of the scene, reset some props.

But mainly, it's just you. And the residue of the first act. The air is filled with the words, the ideas of what you just saw. Echoes of the first part of this play. And at the same time, there's something in the wind - what's in store in the second act. The emotions, the human drama. Bubbling. You can almost feel it coming - like you can feel a huge thunder storm on the way.

(HE looks up. She does as well.
HE makes a note in his notebook. SHE'S been politely listening to him, now turns to fully face theatre, see if she can see or feel anything he's been talking about. SHE shrugs, starts to leave.)

HE: So, what are you thinking?

SHE: Uh, well...

HE: This show hits hard, doesn't it? Makes you think.
(pause)
Now, I don't know WHAT I'm thinking. But I'm thinking. This made me think.
What do you think?

SHE: Uh, well...I think...I think I'm glad this first act was only an hour long. (small laugh_

HE: What? I don't know...that monologue from the sister. I thought that was cut a little too short. I wanted to hear more. There was a lot going on there, and it just, kind of...abruptly stopped.

SHE: Not too abrupt.
The monologue was interrupted,
stopped by the entrance of her mother...

HE: But it could have gone on. And on.
What she was doing was pure poetry. And it was
performed flawlessly.

SHE: It wasn't bad.

HE: Not bad! It was impeccable. That's
a moment, a performance that
I'm going to remember for next year's
awards.

SHE: Really?

HE: Oh yeah! I'm gonna mark this
down.
(HE writes)
My awards tally.

SHE: You keep...?

HE: Of course. This is full of all the great
moments, the amazing performances, the
outstanding shows that happen during the year.

SHE: (looking over his shoulder) It's getting full.

HE: I know. But now we have all the new theatre
companies, so many of them. And they're all
spawning new playwrights. We are so lucky.
We have so-o-o-o many...

SHE: Tell me about it.

HE: What's that?

SHE: (SHE hesitates, then) All the new
theatre companies.
(Laughs, SHE waits for reaction. None)
I mean...
(SHE sits)
All the new theatre companies?

HE: Yes? Yes!!!

SHE: There's a lot of them.

HE: Oh yes!

SHE: Maybe...too...many?

HE: What?

SHE: (Sighing) Uh...we have a...limited...market here.

(HE doesn't get it.)

There's more new theatre companies here than there are new audience members.

HE: Oh c'mon!

SHE: And you know better than most about the media.

Where...how are people supposed to find out about these new groups...these new...

HE: That's our job, to...

SHE: To what? Review these shows? All of them.

Then who sees these reviews? And most of the reviews done here are simply...kind of...reactions to something you just saw.

I mean, we could try to give some perspective in our reviews - who these people are, what have they been doing, what the new groups might add to the scene...but nobody does that, either.

HE: We don't have much time to...

SHE: Right! Because there's too many shows.

Too many new groups.

HE: But these people starting groups deserve the chance to...to express themselves.

SHE: This isn't the third grade. We shouldn't be praising...adults for expressing themselves.

HE: These are artists, looking to present stories and themes that...

(SHE stares, looks away, shakes her head, he backs down)

HE: So, what to do you want? What are we supposed to do?

SHE: (standing) I don't know, maybe...write in our reviews,

somewhere...THERE'S TOO MANY THEATRE GROUPS!
Maybe that would give somebody pause before launching
another new group...

(SHE looks around, notices a few people looking at her
outburst, nods/mouths a "Sorry", sits)

HE: (half-whispering) This year, there were over
4,000 shows at The Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

SHE: Edinburgh? Shut up! So you don't think we're in kind
of an epidemic of new theatre companies.

HE: Yes, and that's delightful! New stories, new people,
new ways of looking at the stage. They're the lifeblood...

SHE: Or what? Are these new groups, what? Novelties.
Shiny new...r maybe just another chance to get out of the house...

HE: Please. Please. There are different critics, just like different
theatre groups. Each one is different...

SHE: That's for sure.

HE: And we all have different things we look for, and we're open
to different ways of telling a story on stage.

SHE: OK OK. (pause) Here's a question. Why can't we ever...
give a bad review?

(This stops him.)

HE: What?

SHE: I don't mean bad bad bad. Wait. See, I'm doing it now. You
just can't...no one gives a bad review here.

HE: So that's what you want, more bad reviews?

SHE: No, just...see, here...we know these people, the actors,
directors. We seem them, all over. And there's just a few of us,
so...so, I know how hard it is to give someone you know a bad review,
or even...a...a balanced one that gives some...some constructive criticism.

HE: I don't know about that.

SHE: Here, Here, if the cast remembers most of their lines, and don't
fall down on stage, they're going to get a decent review. When's the last
time you ever really, really criticized a production, or a company for a

show that didn't really make it?

HE: I...I...

SHE: I know. Never! I need a break.

(SHE stands, starts to walk out)

HE: (stands) Wait, Wait! I recently reviewed a show, it was a mashup, oh I love those! You remember the one where Mary Tyler Moore, Dua Lipa, Helen Keller and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are all getting colonoscopies, so they gather at Amelia Earhart's house to prep. And the hilarity ensues.

SHE: I remember that line in your review.

HE: And then remember the backup singers in the show - uh, Emma Stone, Michelle Obama and who else? Oh yeah, Caitlin Clark singing patriotic feminist themes. And that inspires Helen Keller and she becomes a rapper.

SHE: I thought you loved that show.

HE: Oh, I did I did. But the show was so timely, so brave, and I thought it just didn't go far enough. That show had the potential to be great...

SHE: Hah!

HE: ...but it stopped too soon. It could have made a major statement.

SHE: That was your bad...your not great review?

HE: Well, yes...what about you? Do you give any bad reviews?

SHE: Uh, I don't...

HE: So, do you see any good productions here?

SHE: Of course.

HE: So, what do you look for in a show.

SHE: (SHE sits) I look for a well-written play - classic, contemporary, comedy, drama, whatever - performed competently by a group directed to deliver the play to the audience.

HE: (HE sits) And you see some of that here?

SHE: Sure I do.

But I also see...garish shows where the cast runs around screaming incessantly. In a frenzied, desperate manner that I hoped everyone would leave behind in their college days. Kind of like the Helen Keller Amelia Earhart show.

HE: Now, wait, that was...

SHE: I see vain efforts to protest current social policies, with impotent scripts from companies patting themselves on the backs for their bravery, and audiences nodding at the show. And one hour later, they forget the noble cause they were all there to protest.

(HE stands, starting to say something. SHE stands and rolls on)

I see musicals - dozens and dozens and dozens of musicals. Musicals are so hard to do, and to an audience, they look even harder. Companies work so hard to produce them. And when they do...well, the groups do benefit, greatly, from large casts who bring loads of friends that help build their audiences, and they do receive extremely positive feedback - from audiences and critics - that comes primarily from the fact that everybody just watched people do something that looked so hard to do.

HE: God, I love musicals. (HE stands, waves arms). That should be...that should be life! In the middle of anything, anything! - a love affair, a war, a murder - to be able to sing your heart out, and let everything come out in a song. And a dance.
But, look, even there...different companies...a musical from one group is not the same as one from...

SHE: Yes, there are different companies.

The top companies...the top companies here are like fortresses. They protect what they've got with every bit of firepower at their disposal.

That forces the second tier of groups to go crazy...pushing weird shows and screaming PR to get attention...hoping to grab a few crumbs from those top groups. Who will barely glance their way.

And then all the new groups...trying to get some, any traction, in a chaotic overpopulated, live and let die theatre climate.

HE: Yes, different companies. All with different missions. And styles.
But together, they form a true community, a theatre community...

SHE: We don't have a theatre community here. We have a number...a great number...of individual theatre communities. Some big, some little, all on their own. With their own, same old same old people. And their own, same old style of shows. Their own little fiefdoms.
I don't see a lot of community here...

HE: I have to...I have to stand up for our theatre community. And out critics, they are dedicated individuals who...

SHE: Our critics are like...you know what I think our theatre critics are like... they're like food critics on the Titanic. They may know what they're writing about - and they might write beautifully...but something else is happening. There's some other things going on that their readers should know about it. But we're not telling them.

(Sighs) I don't know I keep doing this. I don't even know if I can watch this second act. How...why...how do you keep doing this?

(HE sits)

HE: I confess. I am a martyr.. At the altar of art. Everyt single thing I see on stage, every song, every monologue, I consider a sacrament. And every time I go to something - whether it's in a 2,000 seat theatre, or a small room in the back of a bar, I consider that...a sacred space.

(SHE starts to leave.)

SHE: I need a glass of wine.

HE: So, do you have any hope for theatre?

SHE: (she stops) Every time the curtain rises. And the lights come up.

HE: Can you bring me a wine? Rose?

SHE: Sure.

HE: Thanks.

(SHE leaves. HE sits. Makes his Critics Cove gesture.)

END

