

On Criticism: An Exchange Between Eric Bentley and Bert Cardullo, October 2003

Bentley: Dramatic criticism, today? The standards of the theatre are so low that the talents of a critic of art are not called for. He's really not put to work. If one's interest were poetry, even though there may be no great poets around on the scale of Dante or Shakespeare, nevertheless, the poetic writing is serious and meets a fairly high spiritual standard. But to be a critic of poetry you have to be highly qualified, intellectually speaking, to even see what the differences are between rather good and a little better than that. These finer distinctions, which are the very essence of intellectual work, are totally uncalled for in the theatre because nearly everything there has, at best, crude qualities. Crudely good, if good, and mostly crudely bad. So the talent of a real critic is not called for, is not needed. He should either go and exercise it somewhere else, as in criticizing poetry, classical dramatic literature, the great works of the past, or, if he continues to write on the theatre, to look at the context of it. This is what I had been attempting to do: look at the sociology of it, the history. I think of myself as a commentator on the whole scene. I'm not saying that all criticism is unimportant, just theatre reviewing. I still think that it's good to have a lot of published discussion of cultural matters generally. Journalism at its highest level has some intellectual importance. So have literary magazines. But theatre, well, it's neither like television, which has immense sociological importance, nor poetry, which has immense spiritual importance. It has *no* importance! Anybody of average intelligence can judge plays as well as the newspaper critics, and perhaps better, because many of them aren't even of average intelligence. You don't need a special man to decide that the Broadway playwrights are of no intellectual interest. It's known. It's obvious. No critic would become a dramatic critic. Not for long, anyway.

BC: It seems to me, though, that a good critic does not depend upon the value of what he sees for the value of what he writes. The ideal critic can write as good, as useful, as productive, as intelligent, as brilliant a review of *Getting Gertie's Garter* as he can of *King Lear*. This is proved by some of the things you yourself have written. If you look back on it, you'll find that this is true of every good critic: that some of his best pieces were about plays that nobody would ever dream of remembering except for the fact that he wrote about them. This is certainly true

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of Bernard Shaw. The level of work he found in the late 1890s was certainly not notably higher than the work you would find if you came back to weekly criticism, and yet, Shaw, like all his really first-rate successors, happened to write extremely well about extremely bad plays. This, I think, can still be done according to a method that you discovered. I think you made a great contribution in teaching us how to write about bad plays—how to say something useful and intelligent about them, not just how lousy they are—by treating them as symptoms of a larger malaise and using them as occasions to discuss this larger malaise. This has been a tremendously valuable contribution to the history of dramatic criticism in this country, and this approach to criticism is what unites the post-Bentley school. This is what makes Robert Brustein’s work so good, for example. If the play is nothing as a play, what is its value, what is its interest as a symptom of one of our national sicknesses? But I think dramatic criticism is still of some use in creating, to take a phrase from you, a climate of opinion. This is not to cause this play to flourish and that play to die, but to suggest the possibilities of feeling and seeing and reacting. In other words, the critic uses the play as an occasion for making some sense about the world outside the theatre. I am sure that you would consider *The Rothschilds* (to take one egregious example from the 1970s) as one of the things you left criticism to avoid seeing. Some people are more sympathetic to Broadway mediocrity than you are, but I still can understand fleeing criticism in order not to have to sit through *The Rothschilds*. But I read a review of *The Rothschilds* in which the critic didn’t mention the play until the eighth paragraph, and yet he was talking about matters that the play brought up, and I think he was saying something of some use. This is what a critic can do. Even if the theatre is as unimportant as you think, the critic can make some small, useful pieces of discourse, and if he is very, very good, can make a small piece of his own art from even the worst plays. This is what Shaw and Max Beerhohm achieved. They made small masterpieces for which bad plays were the raw material, and as long as this is a possibility (and it’s what every good critic should hope for) then there will be some use in dramatic criticism.

Bentley: When I resigned from *The New Republic*, I felt that the particular group of critics active at the time should resign as well, and that I was prepared to lead the way. I don’t think anybody followed the lead; I just felt it would be good to have a clean slate. I think since we don’t have purges from “above,” it would be good if people purged themselves now and again. It’s the same on faculties: they have tenure and stay forever. Shaw worked as a theatre critic for four years, and he found that was quite enough. There are many jobs like that, that shouldn’t be done for a lifetime. What do people who continue working do, except become exhausted, or develop a talent for something else? I think if I were editor of a magazine, I would either not have the theatre covered at all, especially if it’s a national magazine, because outside of New York there’s not much interest in theatre, or if it’s a New York magazine with heavy emphasis on city readership here, then I would only

hire the drama critic for a couple of years with the understanding that it would be more interesting for him to give his place to somebody else.

BC: You have a good point here in that the best critics, Shaw being the best example, but also Beerbohm and Kenneth Tynan, took the job for a few years and then left it to do something else. In many cases, only the mediocrities went on from decade to decade. I do think, however, that it should be *possible* to retain your ability to perceive, your zest, your freshness, your interest. Also, there's another thing involved here. You clearly left because you hated what you were seeing. And I think it's hard to say where ideology stops and taste begins. They have a lot to do with one another, but in the school that descends from you, the school of Brustein and Richard Gilman, the critical school to which I think I more or less belong, one of the principles of their orthodoxy is that in our sick society the theatre that expresses that society has to be sick, that Broadway is absolutely corrupt. And that makes me feel the need to go ahead with something other than criticism. I've never been a full-time critic, and even at this point, I'm a teacher first and then a critic. Teaching means more to me, and it gives me more of the satisfaction I need. Fortunately, I have always been able to do both. I can see that if you did nothing but go to the theatre three or four times a week and write about it, and that was your whole vocational life, that you would begin to get a little squirrely. To quit doing that seems to me an eminently good idea. I don't think that I would take a critical job that wouldn't allow me to teach. But I don't think it's necessary to make that choice. You and Brustein went on teaching at Columbia (and other places) all through your critical careers. That's one of the advantages of writing for a weekly. I agree that if your whole life was this round of opening nights, cigarettes on sidewalks, and newspaper offices, you would get limited, and if you hated the stuff you saw, you would very likely get bitter. So I think it's extremely useful to have a career outside, and most of the good critics have always done this. It's possible to do them both together—not if you go to the theatre four times a week, but if you go to the theatre twice a week, you can certainly teach.

Bentley: I left because I was tired of seeing the same kind of bad show over and over again. The average member of the theatre-going public (if there is such a person) sees a few plays each season: maybe nine or ten, at most fourteen or fifteen. But the critics, especially if they cover Off-Broadway, see dozens and dozens, if not hundreds. It's too many. Few of them can be of any distinction, and even noting the faults, well, oh dear, the same faults appear in thousands of shows. They're easy enough to see; you don't have to be bright. A person who *is* bright, like, in the older generation, George Jean Nathan, or more recently, John Simon, has nothing to do but perfect his waspishness. Why whet your knife when there's nothing to cut but soft rancid margarine?

BC: I think you have to review in terms of your own standards, or in terms of something that goes deeper than your standards. But I think that one of the forms

in which the devil tempts theatre critics is to tempt them so that they conveniently seem to end up having the opinion that will enable them to be most cleverly nasty. I don't think that insincerity need to be involved here. This can happen, and it is one of the insidious problems that while you genuinely believe that you are fighting the good fight, you can actually be irresponsibly vicious. It's a minor pleasure: the sense that you've paid someone back for what he's done to you. It's a temptation, and I really try to fight it. When I've written something that I think is extremely nasty in a clever way, I look it over very carefully and ask myself if the play or the film was really that bad. Is this what I think of it? Even if the comment is literally true, does it, taken with the rest of the review, give a false impression? Bernard Shaw said that people who complained about what he said should only have heard what he didn't say. I have taken out wisecracks I was very fond of because the work was really not quite bad enough to deserve them. Now it may be that I have left in others that I ought to have taken out. It's very hard to know when you've gotten corrupted unconsciously.

Bentley: Nonetheless, the theatre in modern times has not been consistently challenging. It has been consistently unchallenging. But once in a while something happens. A play like *Waiting for Godot* opens and the theatre, for the moment, attains a dignity again. It's exciting to be around when Something Happens. Of course, if you're Walter Kerr, you announce that nothing happened after all. Look back at his review of *Waiting for Godot*. But a lot of people knew he was wrong and that something *had* happened between eighty-thirty and eleven that evening. Some people felt that when Bertolt Brecht's plays were first done, that they were witnesses to a Spiritual Event, as in previous generations when Ibsen's plays came along, or when Shaw's plays were produced. Of course, newspaper critics denied it on *all* those occasions! They have an amazing record, those fellows!

BC: Harold Clurman once said that whether the critic is good or bad doesn't depend on his opinions, but on the reasons he can offer for those opinions. The point is not whether or not Walter Kerr likes Samuel Beckett, but *why* he likes or does not like Beckett. What can he tell you about the theatre, American society, mankind, the universe, art, and God, in the course of explaining why he does or does not like Beckett? Of course, there is also the argument that Walter Kerr's reasons for disliking Beckett are extremely bad ones. I suppose that what I am saying is that there is a good case to be made for and against almost every writer, actor, play, and so on. I'm not the first to point this out, but Walter Kerr for his part communicated a sort of *trahison des clercs*. He wouldn't have bothered people so much if he hadn't been an intellectual. I mean, it is just not worth anybody's while to crusade against a Richard Watts because anybody who doesn't understand that a Richard Watts is just not there as a serious critic will not be convinced, no matter what you say. Because Kerr clearly was an intelligent man, however, because he really knew his theatre art—not only in terms of show business, but in terms of Aeschylus on down

to the present—because he used to be a university teacher, there was this feeling that he had betrayed something. Stupid men you don't bother with, but intelligent men, they can be dangerous. Also, Kerr, having been critic of the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*, wielded a considerable amount of power. He led the fight against a fair number of the leading writers of the present day. Beckett is the most notable example. He talked about Beckett and Brecht from a point of view that accepts Broadway postulates that you and Brustein regard, not entirely unjustly, as anathema. But again, it seems to me that there is a case to be made for and against almost everybody. Voltaire used to make a very good case against Shakespeare from Voltaire's own point of view. T.S. Eliot used to say that he had never seen a really cogent refutation of Thomas Rymer's strictures on *Othello*, and Rymer called *Othello* "a bloody farce without salt or savor, the moral of which is that housewives should look to their linen." There really is a case to be made against the absurdists. Depending upon what you want, they either have it, or don't have it. They, like all other writers who have ever been born, have their limits. Like all other writers who have ever been born, there is a possibility that their influence can be a pernicious one. It seems to me that a good case for or against any kind of art or artist is a useful service. And Walter Kerr was the very best possible Walter Kerr. For his position, he made a good case. Like Winthrop Sargeant, when you disagreed with him, he forced you to define your own position in disagreement. Also, Kerr had a kind of practical shrewdness. When something went subtly wrong in the theatrical collaboration, he could sometimes put his finger on it in a way nobody else could. He was, among other things, a Broadway director. His experience was useful experience, and he knew how to use it.

Bentley: When I look back in *The Life of the Drama* and see what I myself did with the drama of social indignation, I realize that I was over-hasty. I was trying to concentrate on other things. That passage about indignation and drama is, to me, one of the least adequate parts of my book. I would like to go back and change it a bit. Both there, and earlier in the fifties, when I wrote about Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman, I put them down too much. It wasn't that I was working myself up into a frenzy I didn't feel. I was opposed to them, and I overdid it. I wrote a piece called "Lillian Hellman's Indignation." I said that indignation is a weak emotion for drama. Today I would want to elaborate on that. There is an incompatibility between that passage in *The Life of the Drama* and my later discussions in *The Theatre of Commitment* and *Theatre of War*. Critics are so unfair! As I look back (of course, one has this objectivity when it's too late) I see how much more favorably I wrote of Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* than of Hellman and Miller, yet, if you'd asked me, at any date, if I thought him a better playwright than they are, I don't suppose I'd have said yes. His play got a better review from me because of various historical "accidents." I think Hochhuth has grave faults, and somewhat the same faults as Hellman and Miller. Just think: had I encountered him at a different time,

I might have given him totally bad reviews! If you go back to some of my early stuff, you'll find such a lot of advocacy! I was always a moralist. Always taking up causes. Culture itself was a big cause with me. Do you understand why that was? Culture was a cause, not because I came from a cultural home, but because that was what I *didn't* come from. I was busy *acquiring* culture. Trying to find out for what it stood, and what "standards" were. Like many people in the modern world, both in America and in Britain, where I grew up, I think now that some of my ideas were inexact or even quite wrong. Undoubtedly, I stressed certain truths at the expense of other factors, perhaps because they were self-evident to me at the time. Later, I wanted to go back and look at the whole scene. That is, look at society and even social change . . . I think you have to go outside the aesthetics to judge the aesthetics.

BC: The problem with being a missionary is that to be a missionary you have to have orthodoxy, and I'm not sure that that's a good idea. It can be a limitation. I don't want it ever to happen to me that I can't see something because I'm blinded by the blinkers of my beliefs (though obviously it does and will happen to me, as it happens to everybody). It seems to me that Walter Kerr, for instance, with the best will in the world, was unable to perceive virtues in certain kinds of experimental theatre because his tastes and beliefs just went the other way. Analogously, but oppositely, the orthodox-highbrow school is sometimes incapable of perceiving excellences in commercial theatre because they believe so rigorously that they are not there. Advocacy of one particular kind of theatre can be a useful service. This is what Shaw was doing in the 1890s, and what Tynan was doing in the late fifties, but that isn't what some critics are temperamentally suited to providing. They think that their function is rather to try to sort out what is healthy from what is sick, what is positive from what is pernicious in every kind of theatre: to begin with the notion that there are different sorts of excellences to be found in different places, and to separate out in every context what is excellent, with the understanding that this is extremely colored by their own set of ideas as a perceiver. They try to stay as loose as they can. Shaw said that when you find that a play is absolutely, totally inadequate as X, then it behooves you, in fact, to ask if the play is not really Y. It seems to these critics dangerous to believe that a play must be this or that or the other thing because it interferes with one's ability to perceive. Listen to the work, they say, when it lays down its own criteria, as works always do. They always imply how they are to be judged. Now these criteria themselves can also be judged, but you have to start, says this kind of critic, by trying to see what kind of a thing it is, and not demanding that it be one particular kind of thing. When you see what kind of thing it is, then quite irrespective of your judgment of how good or bad it is at being the kind of thing it is, you can make a judgment about it as a good kind of thing to be or not. But this type of critic thinks it's dangerous to come in with a rigid set of rules. And one further thing. In addition to what the artist has tried to

do, you've often got to ask, what has the writer done that he didn't try to do? What is his unconscious doing behind his back? You have to keep open to the possibility of totally unexpected things happening that turn out well. There are a great many plays that offer themselves as serious works of art that fail dismally, and yet, you can't write them off because they do succeed as mild entertainment. That possibility has to be kept open. Everybody's job is to keep possibilities open.

Bentley: I'm quoting now from my article "Oppenheimer, Mon Amour": "I don't actually regard it as more important to write a good play than to tell the truth about Oppenheimer. The life of Oppenheimer is far more interesting than most good plays, and I, for one, would gratefully accept a bad play or a good non-play (a documentary or even a book) provided it made a fascinating contribution to biography and history." If people become what I call over-aesthetic, they somehow are assuming that it's more important to write, to produce good works of art, than it could be to do anything else. The people who defended Ezra Pound were people who believed that art is God. If he's a good writer, that transcends all discussion of treason, etc. I'm a little bit closer to the opposite position, though I don't think I'm directly at the other extreme. When it comes to Oppenheimer, a subject that interests me, I'm not primarily interested in the problem, "Has Heinar Kipphardt written a good play?" I want to know if he's got hold of something that makes me see Oppenheimer in a new way. That would validate my evening in the theatre. No, I'm not losing all interest in artistic merit. If Kipphardt can also write a great play, marvelous! But I will settle for less. I have the impression that those who regard themselves as dramatic critics with high standards will dismiss such a work as Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* as soon as they have established to their own satisfaction that it isn't a very good play. To me, this is a very good play. To me, this is a very significant *man*, Oppenheimer, and it would be quite an achievement if you could say something significant about him even without writing a good play. As I said, I don't regard it as more important to write a good play than to tell the truth about Oppenheimer.

BC: I think there is something narrow about your use of the word "aesthetic" here. The Oppenheimer play is an extremely bad play because it doesn't tell a truth of any particular interest. It tells a truth, but that isn't very hard. Every day the *New York Times* comes out with a large number of truths. A fact is a truth. Aristotle said that poetry is more philosophic than history. I disagree. I think that good history is every bit as philosophic as good poetry, but I think that the problem with the Oppenheimer play is that it's not philosophic in that sense. It only grinds away at small facts and misses the really interesting issues implied in that particular confrontation, and therefore, it is lousy history and a lousy play at the same time. And I think that Hochhuth plays, whatever they are, they're terrible, because the same thing that makes them lousy history makes them lousy plays. A good history play is good in both ways. What makes Hochhuth's work lousy history and lousy

drama is simply that the man's mind is heavy, cumbersome, literal, and simple. And therefore, whatever specific truths the man may tell in the course of things, he reduces these pieces of history to far less complex, resonant, and significant matters than they really are. I think that you, feeling that these are important plays, that these are the kind of plays that should be written, overlook whether they are written well or badly. It seems to me that if a history play is to be any good, it has to be good history and a good play at the same time. This doesn't mean that it has to be accurate. Shakespeare's history plays are full of inaccuracies.

Bentley: My article on the New Lafayette Theatre contains a totally negative view of the most successful play that group had on in a long while, *The Black Terror*. I thought it was extremely tiresome, even though I agreed with a lot that the author presumably meant. What is more tiresome than merely being in agreement? I have, in fact, seen lots of plays where I am very sympathetic to what the author thinks, but I was so bored! I don't think agreement helps an awful lot. People who go to church agree and fall asleep at the same time . . . In its time I gave a favorable review to *The Psychic Pretenders* but most of my review is not about the writing. I say that the words are the weakest part of that show. I paid compliments where they were due: to a certain type of showmanship and a certain attitude. It was not a "rave," so I don't know if that management did very well out of me. Other people who have had bad reviews from me who could have expected good ones (on the grounds of ideological sympathy) are Leonard Bernstein for *Mass*, Fernando Arrabal for a play supposedly sympathetic to the Spanish loyalists, and the Oppenheimer play itself. I think I was very harsh on a lot of the younger playwrights at the time, Megan Terry and others. "What does he ever do for us?" they used to ask. "And we are writing the actual radical plays!" And that is because I have never been able to praise plays because of my agreement with them. It seems to me that the radical playwright has to make his radicalism active in art by making it very concrete, by making it very ironic. He has to show the contradictions in any situation. It's to be expected, therefore, as in the cases of Brecht and Shaw, that people will find their art less consistent than their theoretical remarks outside the art. They take a position, outside, which has a certain consistency, but in a work of art you show the difficulties or inconsistencies of people: the pull the other way. The shock even—sympathy with the Inquisitor! Shaw tells you in his Preface to what extent he's for inquisitors. In the play the whole reality is shown. I was against the Living Theatre. I thought that was propaganda in the worst sense. I was friendlier to Joe Chaikin and the Open Theatre, because they were less crudely propagandist; they had dialectical movement, or two sides. I acknowledge that there are aesthetic values, and that critics invoke them by being critics. One piece of writing is better than another, period. But such superiority cannot be seen in purely aesthetic terms. Moral elements enter in. That is why I wonder about Ezra Pound. Of course, he was a very gifted writer, and, of course, he also had moral insight here and there.

At the same time, if you think that the wisdom of some of the great poets, such as Shakespeare or Dante or Goethe, has anything to do with their talent, as I do (I don't think it's just something they had as an "extra"), then the absence of such wisdom makes Pound a lesser figure than they are. Descending from the sublime to the everyday realities of newspaper drama criticism—all of it is strongly ideological. The man who dominated the New York theatre from the twenties till the early sixties was Brooks Atkinson. Politics and morality entered into his judgments all the time. He favored liberal and humanitarian causes, and he often overpraised plays (aesthetically speaking) when he was in agreement with them. He boosted certain types of good intuitions that never got beyond intuition.

Bentley: I think it's a mark of honor to be able to see, acknowledge, and expose the faults and inadequacies of work you agree with. It means that no party has you in its pocket. People who overpraise without meaning to do so can be forgiven; people who do it on purpose are liars. We are all tempted to do this sincerely and I think it's a forgivable excess, but when you say, "This stinks, but I'll say it's good," for whatever reason, that's a sin against the Holy Ghost. That's inadmissible. Let me cite Shaw again here. He said, "If my father was an actor-manager, and his life depended on his getting a good notice, I would orphan myself tomorrow morning if his performance was not adequate." (I'm not quoting accurately here.) Shaw says that that is the critical instinct, and I agree. The critic bears witness. That's what he's there for. If he bears a lying witness—for whatever reason—he's betrayed himself and his calling. He's betrayed everything there is for him to betray. Where I got this, I suppose, is from what Matthew Arnold says about culture. As he sees it, the job of critics is not to tie themselves down to any party to the extent that their ability to perceive is warped—which is what happens when you tie yourself down too hard. One very important function of the critic is to be a shit detector, and since shit is found all over, it is very important that the critic's detector work in all directions. (Matthew Arnold doesn't quite talk about it in those terms, but Ernest Hemingway did.) I do see myself, however, as trying to preserve the theatre or to promote a certain kind of cinema, but not by boosting and propagandizing for it. I don't go along with the school of thought that says we have to pretend that it's better than it is, just to keep it alive, because I think that is lying. I didn't go into any of my present professions in order to be a liar. However, it is our function to help keep this or that art alive by talking about it, by demonstrating our own concern with it, by showing that it is possible for intelligent people to still care about it, and by denouncing evil and praising virtue so as to do what you can to create a theatre or a cinema that deserves to live. But I do think it's possible to imagine a theatre, for one art, that just does not deserve to live.

Bentley: It is not one of the critic's duties to try to preserve the theatre because no institution was ever kept going by verbal support from outside. Institutions survive from their own inner energy as accepted by the non-writing public. The locus of

the energy is the theatre itself . . . There is a relationship between stage and public, between stage and auditorium, actor and audience. A little encouragement can be given from outside, as by critics, for instance, or even by newspapers which print a notice saying, "The show will take place on Friday." Otherwise there is no audience. Still, I think the main things take place *after* those preliminaries and *before* the critic writes his articles, with just the audience present. Unless a play, like Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, generates a certain energy, on the evening of performance, in *that* theatre—not just among people who write about it, though including them—there is no life in the drama. That's where the life is. It's not totally independent of critics, but neither is it heavily dependent on them. The problems are not with the medium as such, but with the institution as it now exists. The medium is the same medium Shakespeare contributed to; the institution is not. If the play is on Broadway, or anything approaching Broadway, such as the larger Off-Broadway enterprises, the main criterion applicable would be: has this, whatever the author's intentions, by its first night turned into commercial entertainment? If so, the system wants it; if not, the system doesn't want it. Radical authors have been praised when they have met that test and their stuff has ended up as commercial entertainment, and have been dispraised as high-minded but untalented playwrights otherwise. So that's going to happen one way or the other in despite of all individuals. It's of no concern whether Mr. A or Mr. B is writing the criticism. What is left is the weight of the institution. Even writers like Brecht and Shaw are only of interest to this system insofar as they produce the same old commercial entertainment. The theatre isn't commercial because David Merrick was a very commercially minded individual. It would be exactly the same had he never been born: exactly the same. There would be someone else by the same name, or by a different name. So it's not a question of changing the theatre, but of changing the society if you want the theatre also to change. You may change the society and then wait until there's a new theatre, or, like Brecht, figure that the theatre participates in the changing of society. He didn't have very much success along that line, it has to be said. Jean Genêt thought he had none . . . Institutions, theatrical institutions or any other kind, are part of the society in which they exist. They may be rebellious occasionally, but it's very difficult and problematic for theatres to be in total opposition. How can they support themselves, economically, in that case? Generally, theatres have been part of what we call an Establishment, whatever the Establishment was. For Molière or the Greeks, it was organized by the existing ruling class. That would stand to reason. Who else would even have put up the buildings? Therefore, if you have a highly decadent form of society, as many of us feel we have today, it isn't that the theatre's so much worse but that the theatre is an integral part of the whole. If George W. Bush is not a very great president and if his regime doesn't represent a very high degree of wisdom and progress, then it's clear what theatre in his society will be like.

BC: I believe that the theatre works slowly, subtly, subliminally, but that it does

work positively on the people who go to it. Perhaps this is just self-serving, blind faith, but it is what I do believe. I don't think that Brecht's contribution was nil, but I still wouldn't say that the theatre is important in any "dramatic" way. I don't think that people go to the theatre and have sudden conversions like Saint Paul on the road to Damascus; that they go in planning to vote for a Republican and come out planning to vote for a Democrat. I think the effect is slower, subtler, more cumulative. It's like marijuana, which doesn't do much to you puff by puff, but as certain scientists once told us, if you smoke it regularly for twelve years, you will begin to be a different person because of it. And I think the theatrical effect is similarly cumulative. It builds up, polyp by polyp, like a coral island. It's slow. It's immeasurable. And, of course, it depends on what you bring to it. But if you bring something to it, it will bring something to you ultimately, and if this is true, then the critic has something to do with helping that process along. All the same, I'm interested in change very much because the theatre is not in such blooming condition that anybody should fight very hard to keep it as it is. As to how the change should come about . . . The point is not to tell an actor you did this and you should have done that, or to tell a writer you did this and you should have done that, because this reduces all your other readers to eavesdroppers. Essentially, you're talking to the public, and whatever you say is, first of all, intended for them. But how then should a critic bring about change? Slowly. The critic should bring about changes in the theatre the way the theatre brings about changes in the world. Not measurably, and perhaps you have to take it on faith that these changes come about at all. But by offering possibilities to your readers, you have some effect on the climate. Not on this play's fate or that play's fate, but on what kinds of pleasure and enlightenment the theatre can afford, how they can be created, what sort of institutions could create them, what the prevailing corruptions are, and how they can be rooted out. Not in the specifics, but slowly and pervasively you hope to have some effect. No critic penetrates very far into the system. Million-dollar investments do not vanish or flourish at a critic's word.

Bentley: I've been writing more *for* the theatre in the latter part of my career, and this is difficult, but rewarding, spiritually speaking. I don't feel that acts of theatre make a tremendous contribution toward changing the world, but they can perhaps make some small dent. Things in the past, like Clifford Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, didn't overthrow capitalism or even make a sizeable contribution to that end. Nor, adding all the other works of Odets and all the other works of communist or social(ist) realism in the thirties, did they do much. But then again, it doesn't follow that because their contribution wasn't enormous that it's therefore negligible. Yet what can one do? Let's say we were tremendously interested in religion and promoting the cause of religion. We might have a church. We might not believe, as the extreme evangelists do, that we are somehow preparing for the end of the world, getting ready for it fast, and saving people by the million. Most conscientious

priests don't have such delusions of grandeur. They think of what they're doing on a smaller scale. They may not be interested in proselytizing much, but if they're not, they're probably very interested in consolidating the forces that they do have. Which means that they do have a didactic church, without being too grandiose in their claims to speed or scope. So things are in the theatre. If we would relate the effort more realistically to the actual audience, we would not fall into the pitfalls of some of the propagandist theatres of the past. If you call yourself a proletarian playwright, and you have not a single proletarian in your actual audience, well, there's something very foolish about that: a lack of self-understanding, let's call it. Let's take something like my project at Yale in the fall of 1972: to do a play about a piece of recent American history, which had certain lessons in it. One of my friends at the time ran a black theatre on the lower East Side. This particular script would not have done much for his audience. They didn't know the public figures in it, they didn't know their careers; they hadn't passed judgment on them, they didn't have arguments about them. It wasn't the material for that particular audience. Contrariwise, it did make sense to present this material on the Un-American Activities Committee, and its treatment of artists and intellectuals, to an audience of Yale students, Yale faculty, and that part of the New Haven population that was friendly with them and mingled with them socially. Many of these people may have disagreed with the point of view I worked into the show. That's legitimate. I'm only saying that the material interested them and concerned them. Was this proletarian theatre? Anything but. It was a theatre of the middle-class intelligentsia. That was a big class, though, in America, and it still is.

BC: To a certain extent, if people like you are not actively demanding that the theatre become better, the chances that it will become so diminish. But I don't think that you are deserting in any way. You have other things to do. You have other, perhaps more important, ways of trying to serve something that ought to be served. I certainly wouldn't argue that criticism is the only way in which the ends of the life force can be served, or even the best way for those who can or want to do it. For me, personally, criticism is still one of the ways—if I weren't writing criticism, I would probably be doing something even less useful! In that context, let me conclude by telling you a story about Sir Henry Irving, the actor. He once scheduled a rehearsal for Sunday, and one of the members of his company said, "Mr. Irving, I noticed that you called a rehearsal for Sunday. Do you think that that is not an impious thing to do? Is it really right that we should be acting on the Lord's day?" And Irving looked at him with the freezing glare for which he was famous, and said quietly, "I think that my work is a *good work*." And that is essentially how I feel about theatre (and film) criticism. I think it's a matter of faith. If you believe it's a good work, you've at least got a chance of making it such—though nothing is guaranteed, God knows.

Bentley: Amen.