

The Elusive Object and the Fading Craft of Theatre Criticism: A Conversation with Gordon Rogoff

Bert Cardullo

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Mr. Rogoff has directed plays Off-Broadway and in Chicago, as well as in Williamstown and Stockbridge, Massachusetts. He directed his own adaptation of six stories from Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, in Buffalo, New York, and Off-Broadway. In 1976, he won an Obie Award for his direction of Morton Lichter's *Old Timers' Sexual Symphony (and Other Notes)*. His honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. He has contributed numerous essays and reviews to such periodicals as *American Theatre*, *Theater*, *The Village Voice*, *Parnassus*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *Plays and Players*. He is the author of *Theatre is Not Safe: Theatre Criticism 1962-1986* (Yale University Press, 1987) and *Vanishing Acts: Theater Since the Sixties* (Northwestern University Press, 2000).

The following interview took place in New Haven, Connecticut, in January 2010.

Bert Cardullo: The enlightened intellect, it has been said, doesn't concentrate on theatre. Is this true in your view and experience?

Gordon Rogoff: God, is it ever true. For Ezra Pound, to name one enlightened intellect, drama is either "fustian" or, in effect, it is nothing at all. And Pound is only one of thousands who rarely apply their enlightened intellect to the theatre.

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I am exaggerating only slightly when I say that it just isn't done. Everybody goes to plays, and some of the most Poundian enlightened intellectuals—T. S. Eliot, Henry James—have even written them, if not very effectively; but theatre has not often inspired demanding ruminations from these minds. Flirting with popularity much of the time—a charge rarely leveled at poetry—and certainly impure, respected only when the written words seem right, the theatrical act itself has suffered a prolonged history of loathing and denial.

BC: While scorn heaped on theatre has not been a sport limited to America alone, American “refinements” of that scorn have long been operating, like the country itself, in a different time zone. Why is that?

GR: Partly because theatrical energies everywhere in America, as late as the nineteenth century, were populist where they existed at all. News from the Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov fronts took decades to reach our shores.

BC: Given the pedagogical bondage in which theatre is held in the United States, then, an aspiring theatre critic confronts a variety of threats to his ambition.

GR: Well, of course. If theatre itself is either scorned or ignored by even an intelligent public, the act of criticism is disarmed almost before it begins. Without an inquiring public, there is not likely to be an editorial policy hospitable to the critic. Furthermore, the young critic will soon discover that, despite William Hazlitt, Bernard Shaw, Max Beerbohm, James Agate, and Kenneth Tynan in England, as well as Stark Young, Harold Clurman, Eric Bentley, Robert Brustein, Richard Gilman, John Simon, and Stanley Kauffmann in America, there is no acknowledged critical tradition. The passionate act itself—the efflorescence of such critical force from time to time—has done nothing to ensure its own survival or renewal.

BC: And theatre critics have sometimes not helped themselves by having hidden agendas.

GR: Yes. Shaw comes to mind in that respect, not to speak of my contemporary John Lahr at *The New Yorker*. Shaw wrote cunningly on behalf of plays he himself was about to write, sometimes disguising that self-interest by presenting Ibsen or Wagner as models. Theatre criticism for him was a job—well done, yes, and with a purpose, but not a job for a lifetime.

BC: It was a job for him among a number of other jobs.

GR: Right. Has anybody ever noticed that the best theatre critics are almost always doing something else? Economic necessity is surely one plausible explanation. Even so, it is a mysterious truth that theatre critics move regularly into and out of the act itself or away from it altogether. The loss to criticism may be a gain for playwriting, painting, novels, directing, or teaching and other such adventures in the non-fictional realm. Still, it is difficult to think of another craft or profession so consistently abandoned by its most gifted practitioners; and, if not always abandoned, shoved to one side while the critic pursues other occupations.

BC: But why has this happened, apart from the issue of economic necessity?

GR: A clue may lie in the behavior of an earlier generation of critics that stuck it out to the last: George Jean Nathan, John Mason Brown, and Brooks Atkinson are remembered (*if* they are remembered) only as theatre reviewers. They didn't teach, produce, do translations or write novels (as Stark Young and Stanley Kauffmann did), or venture into other territories in their writing such as political journalism, aesthetics, religion, biography, and history. They did not even review another performing art, as John Simon and Stanley Kauffmann continue to do to this day, with film. Clearly, their various missions—and monies—could be subsumed in the work of viewing plays and productions almost daily. Newspapers, magazines, and book publishers were ever hospitable to Nathan, Brown, and Atkinson, which suggests that theatre in their time was a subject of some importance. The public success of these men, however, also suggests that what was important about theatre was its sheen or glamour. Their writing about stars from the Barrymores to the Lunts was almost like producing a royal version of *People* magazine.

BC: But Nathan and Atkinson together made the world safe for Eugene O'Neill. Doesn't that count for something in the critical tally?

GR: Yes, of course it does. America needed a heavyweight playwriting contender and they were only too willing to nominate and elect O'Neill as he pursued the longest apprenticeship in playwriting history. Facile, humorous, acerbic, adolescently in love with theatre as an occasion (a little like Richard Hornby today), a reliable spot in a clouded landscape, the reviewers were enthusiastic reflections of an affirmative period in the American theatre. Covering an immensely inventive and energetic Broadway, their pieces read now as much like fan mail as criticism, albeit more selective and vigorously phrased. Among the brightest, but certainly not the best—Stark Young and, later, Eric Bentley, were far more eloquent about acting and plays respectively—Nathan, Brown, and Atkinson flourished at the presumed level of New York's sophisticated audience.

BC: That level, though, was populist, ignorant, and parochial.

GR: That's certainly true. *Theatre Arts Monthly* almost alone, with Stark Young as its most elegant writer, kept America in touch not only with theatrical self, but also with events and innovations abroad. Broadway was as isolationist as Franklin Roosevelt's Republican enemies. Even the enforced exiles of gifted anti-Nazi Germans did not affect the American theatre in any way similar to those exiles' effect on music, painting, architecture, and physics. Consider, for example, the difference between Schoenberg and Hindemith, operating in the United States within dimensions and systems refined in Europe, and Kurt Weill, a theatre composer who adapted swiftly and brilliantly—as well as eagerly—to Broadway, reducing his musical vocabulary, simplifying his harmonies and orchestrations, too often exchanging the tart ironies of his Brecht collaborations and symphonic music for the sweet, drooping sentiments of the new, perky, but finally narrow world.

BC: Well, the American theatre *was* cultivating standards, but it was sustaining

itself outside the stream of aesthetic philosophy and discussion.

GR: Indeed. The great innovations were often technical, for American stage designers kept realizing dreams described earlier by Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. But when American dramatists tried to touch idioms removed from graphic realism, such a poetic drama or expressionist fantasy, the result was highfalutin blather (Maxwell Anderson) or humdrum banality in modern drag (Elmer Rice). Energy, good will, talent, and comic inspiration were never in doubt or question; all that was missing were the density and reflectiveness of the modern novel, the merciless complexity found in painting and music, the reach into imaginative realms and vocabularies that might have challenged an audience at once enchanted and numbed by the movies and radio.

BC: You mean the critics weren't there to point all this out?

GR: No, they were in the same mental space, shaping the same intoxicated values, as the audience! With the exception of Bentley, who inherited Stark Young's position at *The New Republic*, and Harold Clurman in *The Nation*, the situation wasn't much better after the Second World War. It would have been naïve to expect anything else. In broad terms, we get the criticism we deserve. And by now it is clear that the movement of all the arts in America—including, inevitably, the art of criticism—is more firmly linked to the market than in any other country in the world.

BC: Every practicing critic has a story to tell. What's yours, Gordon?

GR: It's about the new young publisher of the *Saturday Review*, who informed me in 1978, "You know too much about the theatre." What he really meant, of course, was that newspapers and magazines sell advertising, part of a chain of "special interests" that make it desirable to have hits on Broadway and even Off-Broadway. These hits, in turn, provide further commercial nourishment to innumerable dependencies—restaurants, taxis, tourism, and banks, as well as the movies and television, which recycle theatre successes for the consuming public. Part of Hollywood's oblique charm and shameless honesty—quite unlike Broadway, which likes to pretend that it is up to something else—is that it so proudly and casually labels as a "property" or "product" absolutely any play, book, or actor. Criticism struggles in America to be about art, but no one can review what little there is without soon feeling the pressure to respond mainly to personalities and trends.

BC: Is the influential *New York Times* the chief culprit here?

GR: It may be too easy, even automatic, to charge *The New York Times* with setting corruptive standards that send powerful signals to critics, audiences, and other journals; but, yes, the *Times* continues to be positioned as the central arbiter, an imperial power telling the natives how to live—or, better, how to conduct business. Standards in theatre criticism were probably set, and then built into an air-tight, self-perpetuating scheme, when Adolph Ochs of the *Times* fired Stark Young as theatre critic in 1925, telling him—as reported by Young in a letter to Julian Huxley—that Young's "writing was too abstract; that Ochs wanted the theater

page to be popularized; that he wanted no point of view set forth upon it.”⁷¹ In the late 1960s, history repeated itself ridiculously when the *Times* did much the same to Stanley Kauffmann. Conspiracy theorists like to imagine angry telephone calls from producers and the Shuberts pressuring the *Times* to get somebody in there without a point of view, but surely Ochs made it clear long ago that the *Times* could always be trusted, of its own accord, to act primarily as a consumer guide. From time to time there may be a critic with a gift for the mocking phrase or even a nicely tailored description of a performance or a design; there may even be a moment or two when a *Times* reviewer wrestles with an idea, or struggles with the possibility that a flawed play passionately felt and true to itself might actually be worth more hyperbole than a mechanically smooth, coldly manipulated drama about nothing but the latest comforting apology for middle-class mendacity. Chances are, however, that *New York Times* reviewers will never stir Mr. Ochs in his grave.

BC: On the contrary, then, the trouble with Stark Young’s “abstract” writing was that it was dangerously specific.

GR: Correct. It wasn’t about hyperbole at all. Young didn’t need it. Even his most minutely described enthusiasms were tempered by an insistent attention to qualifying detail, as I shall now prove by quoting from one of his reviews that I brought with me. If, for Young, Barrymore’s Hamlet was “the most satisfying that I have ever seen,” that did not restrain him from suggesting that Barrymore “must give us—and already promises—the sense of a larger inner tumult.” Is it “abstract” to notice that the actor “allows the phrases to fall apart in such a way that the essential musical pattern of the verse—which is a portion of the idea itself—is lost”? To say that a performer “already promises,” but isn’t yet there, is not a thought or a phrase that submits comfortably to the apostrophized extractions from reviews used by press agents in gigantic ads published—where?—in *The New York Times*. Even Barrymore’s virtues—“shy and humorous mystery, the proud irony, the terrible storms of passion”—would never be quoted by press agents: “terrible storms” might sound like a bad thing. Young was for all seasons, but surely not for these *Times*.

BC: One excuse often heard from those explaining why the *Times* does not use “fine” writers, such as Stark Young, is that the overnight deadline demands a quickly engineered response, a punching-bag style, swift and unequivocal judgments matched by easy-come adjectives that just as easily avoid ambiguity and resonance.

GR: Yes, but the excuse means less now that critics can see previews, thereby taking a day or more to file their reviews. And it never applied to Walter Kerr, a muscular yet stylish writer of Sunday *Times* pieces reflective of his rigid, restrictive, rule-book notions of what constitutes a good play. Kerr’s criticism didn’t require an Ochs to gore it into acceptable position. Informed about the ways plays are developed and rehearsed, he was at his best when describing what he actually saw. When assessing what he hadn’t known before or what wasn’t immediately visible, he scolded and threatened like the White Queen: he could see, for example, that

Bert Lahr's Gogo was funny, but he couldn't forgive Beckett's radical redefinition of playwriting or his apparent obscurities. Similarly, Kerr was the worst audience (and critic) for Chekhov, Pirandello, and Strindberg, which means that he was compelled to be hostile or silent when confronted with every experiment, good or not so good, since the Living Theatre opened the floodgates.

BC: Was Kerr always wrong?

GR: That's not the point, Bert. One shouldn't be sidetracked here by issues of agreement or disagreement. My quarrel with Kerr is not that every Pirandello play is, by definition, better than every Lanford Wilson play; rather, it is the way in which he used his authority as a fancier of Wilson apples to denounce Pirandello oranges. In book reviews for *The New York Times*, nobody ever built a critical career by assuming that Harold Robbins was operating in the same medium or genre as Saul Bellow or Donald Barthelme. The same distinctions are usually honored in the other arts: one can adore George Gershwin without expecting the same kind of lift from Igor Stravinsky; nor is it "elitist," finally, to prefer Stravinsky. The theatre, however, attracts a special kind of closed mind. What may be worse is an editorial policy, such as the *New Yorker's*, which has published George Steiner, John Updike, and V. S. Pritchett on literature, Andrew Porter on music, Pauline Kael on movies, Arlene Croce on dance, and Harold Rosenberg on art. But for theatre—with only Kenneth Tynan's brief interlude in the late 1950s—the *New Yorker* has offered such chatty flyweights as Brendan Gill, Edith Oliver, and (before Tynan) Wolcott Gibbs, each writing flippantly and hyperbolically in a manner that clearly wouldn't be acceptable editorially for the other arts. If Porter had denounced Handel as often as Gibbs denounced Shakespeare, he would have been shipped back to London summarily. It's ironic, too, that the *New Yorker* should give more discursive space to a more popular medium such as film, being treated by a more demanding critic like Kael. The *New Yorker* seems to be telling us not merely that apples and oranges are the same, but that theatrical apples have less crunch and bite than musical or literary apples. Thus does this magazine unmask its own antitheatrical prejudice—a prejudice, of course, that has been with us at least since Plato.

BC: So what you are saying, essentially, is that popular criticism of Walter Kerr's kind is an instance of what Tynan once called, in a different context, "the bland leading the bland."

GR: Apt and amusing as that phrase is, the blind leading the blind will do well enough to describe current criticism's craven relationship to the theatregoing audience. Can there be any point in a criticism that merely reports its perception of public taste? And why is theatre the art most often subjected to so much proud ignorance? Or, to put it another way, why does the intelligent yet populist critic willfully exchange his own direct response for audience response? That same critic hears canned laughter in his living room, knowing that it has been programmed; why, then, does he surrender to laughter in the theatre that is no less automated

and unfelt?

BC: One accidental answer to the questions you raise was furnished by *The New York Times*, in 1985, when it published Frank Rich's review of Simon Gray's *The Common Pursuit* side-by-side with Mel Gussow's interview with Jan Kott on the occasion of the publication of Kott's collected essays, titled *The Theatre of Essence*.

GR: Yes, this is a celebrated instance of, let us call it, "inadvertent revelation." Thanks to you, Bert, I have been able to reread Rich's review and Gussow's interview, and they are worth discussing here at length. Where Kott's method in *The Theatre of Essence* is described by Gussow as "a search for aesthetic and historical perspective," Rich's method emerges as a series of mental somersaults in which the critic is always striving for balance rather than judgment. Rich had seen *The Common Pursuit* earlier in London, where he found it to be "a formulaic effort." Clearly, such a phrase is the beginning of an assessment that is not merely negative. One has reason to believe at this point that Rich will account for the formulas and the ways in which they sabotage what might have been a more provocative dramatic occasion. Instead, he rushes headlong into sabotaging himself: "The play is still superficial," he tells us, "but highly entertaining in its superficiality." Gray "has polished the script—not to the extent of deepening it," which we must suppose would be asking too much, "but certainly to the point of sharpening its cleverness." Leaving aside the unanswerable question of why sharper cleverness hasn't led to a deeper experience, one has a right to know why Rich seems satisfied with less—or with more that still adds up to less. (Vocabulary is an early casualty in this critical exercise, with Gray made to sound more like a shoemaker than a playwright.) Who has actually attended the theatrical event—Rich or a surrogate figure, a happy-go-lucky, undemanding understudy? Later in his review, he refers to "upscale soap-opera twists." Does this mean that he has uncovered secrets about soap operas, namely that some are truly downscale, others upscale?

In yet another twist, he blames the playwright for the leading actor's "strained" performance, announcing what would have been news to Alfred Lunt, Laurence Olivier, or any abundantly imaginative, suggestive actor: that the role is "beyond any actor's power to fill in the blanks." Rich kills his own review with strained kindness, tumbling all over himself to avoid his own position. In the end, bouncing into position, he makes a fifty-yard dash into one of those phrases that is meant to be all things to all people: whereas before he had found that Gray failed to polish the play "to the extent of deepening it," he concludes finally that David Jenkins's set "adds just the right gloss of sweep and depth to an evening of shallow but captivating fun." Speaking earlier of two characters in *The Common Pursuit*, one of whom he calls "the most generous-spirited of nerds," Rich says that they "make moral weakness seem an appealing spiritual calling." Is this criticism or just a job description for reviewing as practiced by the popular press?

Jan Kott, by contrast, not only covers more territory more deeply in his

comments, he locates also the source of such critical acrobatics. “To my mind,” he tells Gusso (who neglects to report the burning of his own ears), “a deep limitation of the American critic is that he does not write as a man who has a political, sexual, emotional, and national life.” Kott himself goes so far in this direction that he writes *around* theatrical events, floating in and out of experience with all his lives in full sail—an indefatigable searcher (like Bentley earlier) gallantly finding links, mirror images, and pressure points where other critics find only isolated, unconnected episodes. I might not always agree with him, but here that becomes precisely the point: criticism works well when casual sentiments of the Rich (but not rich) kind recede into the background, making way for ideas and argument which are themselves evidence that the critic is always looking for something better. Many of us—myself included—too easily become cranky about the load of theatre rubbish dumped upon us from one week to the next. At our worst, we complain that the subject has disappeared. For Jan Kott, the subject is always there, operating in the presence and passion of Kott himself.

BC: Kott’s criticism does not stand alone, as you well know. There are others who work as he does, but, unfortunately, the systems of publication these days do not welcome such criticism on its own terms.

GR: The result is that Kott—like so many similarly inclined critics—has never borne witness to his visions and ideas on a regular basis, in frequent books or in a regular theatre column. The big trade publishers, shamelessly delivering monstrous picture books to multiple coffee tables, have consigned critical review-essays to the limbo formerly reserved for short stories. University presses and small publishers take up some of the slack, but for the most part the idea of theatre criticism as historical record—indeed, as witness—no longer has reliable status.

BC: Yes, but that historical record itself isn’t always a reliable one.

GR: I agree with you. In his otherwise admiring introduction to Kott’s collection, Martin Esslin cites “some of the shortcomings that flow from Kott’s ability to be enthralled and exhilarated by new ideas, new insights, and new discoveries—a premature readiness perhaps to be seduced by the new and seemingly original, a tendency to accept it before it has been tested by time.” Whenever criticism perceives itself as lonely defender of the new, otherwise reliable critics become suddenly uncritical, ceasing to analyze while adopting a tone of enthralled adoration that simply can’t be accurate all the time. If nothing else, going to a Peter Brook or Robert Wilson event is not yet the aesthetic equivalent of a pilgrimage to Lourdes.

BC: And such an uncritical stance toward the new leads to a lot of questions, doesn’t it?

GR: You said it. Here are a few: Are directors, after all, the only source of the new? Are they even the major source? If theatrical newness has lately depended more on directorial scenarios than dramatists’ scripts, isn’t that cause for alarm? Is cleverly used technology as satisfying as a great actor’s inventiveness, or is it simply easier

to applaud than to describe? Are directors' program notes visible on stage? If theatre seems like an endangered species, could it be that its only unique component—the collision of textual complexity with the presence of the live actor—plays very little part in most contemporary criticism? These may be rhetorical questions for critics who are uncommonly enlightened, but they are questions whose answers call now for urgent attention.

BC: What you describe, Gordon, is a kind of battlefield of questions, and one good reason why critics often lose sight of their own vision, their own idea of a theatre.

GR: Before the dust settles, however, critics might pause to reflect on one power they possess that isn't shared by producers, press agents, or publishers: the gift of language. Bonnie Marranca once said that she would like to see the "borders abolished between what is called criticism and what is called writing." I take this to mean, in part, that she sees theatre as a natural metaphor for the way we live. It follows, then, that the responsible critic will perform as any serious writer must perform, by discovering subject, language, and meaning in an act of the imagination. "To live life fully," Marranca has also said, "is to live it as an act of criticism." If this is scarcely evident in American theatre history, then surely it is evidence for insisting on a new critical tradition despite the odds.

BC: We come around to Ezra Pound again. What you seem to be saying is that his famous definition of literature as "language charged with meaning" must also stand for the literature of criticism.

GR: Absolutely. Moreover, that Pound himself was defeated by theatre, that he couldn't begin to find a language for its meaning (according to him, "the medium of drama is people moving about on a stage and using words"!) is no reason for critical surrender. Pound notwithstanding, the theatrical event can always be rescued by, and for, intelligence. When he declared that Aeschylus and Sophocles are not "up to Homer," he was a step away from dismissing their dramatic craft altogether. Odd for a literary critic to deny the critical act in this instance, but theatre critics need not be bullied or humbled. Pound's refusal or incapacity to charge the literature of theatre with critical meaning is just the challenge needed to recharge the literature of theatre *criticism* with a meaning, and a language, all its own.

Notes

1. Stark Young, *A Life in Letters, 1900-1962* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1975).

