

The Man Who Would Be Hated: An Interview with John Simon

Bert Cardullo

John Simon is an American literary, theatre, and film critic. Born in Subotica, Serbia in 1925, he was educated at Harvard (B.A., M.A., and Ph. D.), and has been a regular contributor to a number of magazines, including *The New Leader*, *The New Criterion*, *National Review*, and *The Weekly Standard*. Although not a native English speaker, he is known for his incisive criticism of the (mis)use of the language in American writing, notably in his book *Paradigms Lost: Reflections on Literacy and Its Decline* (1981).

Simon was theatre critic at *New York Magazine* for more than thirty-six years, from October 1968 until he was fired in May 2005. Since June 2005 he has reviewed theatre for BloombergNews.com. His writings on theatre have been collected in several volumes, including *Uneasy Stages* (1976). In 2005, he published three extremely large collections of his work, titled *John Simon on Theatre*, *John Simon on Music*, and *John Simon on Film*. Simon has also written several books on poetry and film, including *Private Screenings* (1967), *Movies Into Film: Film Criticism, 1967-1970* (1971), *Reverse Angle: A Decade of American Films* (1982), *Something To Declare: Twelve Years of Films from Abroad* (1983), and *Dreamers of Dreams: Essays on Poets and Poetry* (2001).

Along with an interview with Eric Bentley (published in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* in Spring 2006) and additional, planned interviews with such critics as Robert Brustein and Stanley Kauffmann, the following conversation with John Simon is part of a book-length project of mine on the history and practice of American theatre criticism. Like my previous interviewee for *JDTC*, Simon is similarly critical of contemporary American theatre and drama. Unlike Eric Bentley, however, John Simon continues to cheerfully play his role as theatre critic, convinced that the practice of criticism alone is profession enough for any educated man. I spoke with him in his Manhattan apartment for several hours on the morning of June 24, 2008.

BC: You were the theatre critic for *New York Magazine* for over thirty-six years, and thus a key voice on the American theatre scene. How did you become a critic?

Bert Cardullo is Professor and Chair of Media and Communication at the Izmir University of Economics in Izmir, Turkey. He is the author, editor, or translator of many books including *American Drama/Critics: Writings and Readings*, *Comparative Stages: Essays in the History of Euro-American Drama*, and *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology*. This interview with John Simon is one of a projected series of interviews with notable American theatre critics.

John Simon: Just as the Radcliffe girl said when asked why she joined the whorehouse, “Just lucky, I guess.” Seriously, part of it is just being in the right place at the right time. Part of it is having someone influential front for you. For example, I got the post at *The Hudson Review*, which was my first drama critic’s position—I got that job because Robert Brustein, who had met me and liked my work, recommended me to the editors of the magazine and they hired me.

BC: What had you been doing up to that time?

JS: I was free-lancing—doing this, that, and other things in various places.

BC: Doing criticism, you mean?

JS: Oh, yes, always. I did a few interviews, too, especially on television, but otherwise it was criticism all the way.

BC: Does one just decide to become a critic?

JS: I think one may be born to be one. If you are difficult, querulous, and something of a perfectionist when you are six or seven years old, as I seem to have been, then you continue in that vein and eventually you make it into print.

BC: Were you told by your editors how to cover the theatre and what to cover, or were you given totally free rein to cover what you chose to cover, to say what you wanted to say?

JS: I have always been 99.99% free to cover what I wanted to cover. Every once in a blue moon, there may have been a suggestion to review this play, or not to review that one.

BC: You are known to be, at times, an exceedingly harsh critic, and calls for your head have come periodically throughout your career from people who reacted negatively to your own negative reactions to their work. What was the response from your editors on those occasions?

JS: Almost all of the editors who had begun to publish me, continued to publish me in such instances. The only places where I was eventually dropped were Channel 13, the public television station in New York—over a bad review of a Marlene Dietrich solo evening—and *New York Magazine*—because, the editors there said in May 2005, they wanted a fresh point of view.

BC: You have always, then, unapologetically held an adversarial role as critic.

JS: Yes, but not because I wanted to adopt such a role. Only because around me there was too much mollycoddling and softheadedness going on. To me, in that climate, the adversarial attitude seemed a perfectly natural one. I don't think of myself as being particularly harsh. Just, yes, and justice can be strict, as we all know. Look, let's be honest: if you like eight out of every ten things that you have to review, then you are not a critic. You should go work instead for the Salvation Army.

BC: How do you respond to the charge that you are an elitist?

JS: I say that you shouldn't eat shit when you can eat caviar. People just produce stuff in a cheap way these days, in an easy way, and they don't care if a thing has lasting value. It's a change in mentality that has overcome the world, and I can't see anything that's going to reverse this process. But I will continue to speak out against it. For better or for worse, I am an unreconstructed highbrow.

BC: Does that mean you are against commercial works?

JS: That's not the worst thing to be—commercial. The trouble I have is with plays that try to be commercial but can't even do that. Those are really bad. But to want to be commercial and succeed is a perfectly acceptable, even honorable, thing. How many plays are going to be works of immortal art? Very few, I'm afraid.

BC: You once wrote that the ideal critic is likable and modest. You've also said that a critic must be arrogant. Can you reconcile the two?

JS: Well, there is a way of being arrogant in a charming way, which is more likable than charmless modesty. People who can't see that you have to ignore, charmingly.

BC: Do you ever criticize yourself?

JS: My *writing*, yes. I criticize my own sentences as I'm about to write them so as to make them as perfect as I possibly can. Indeed, I think I am my own sternest critic. And if I can do it to myself, I can certainly share it with the rest of the world! God knows, everybody should be a critic—not just John Simon—since the world is such a mess.

BC: Did you become a critic out of an impulse to teach?

JS: Well, a critic must be able to be a teacher. A critic continues what a teacher began; he gives a mini-course on whatever subject he is writing about. The critic is a thinker first, however—and one who must have the ability to write as well as any other writer, poets included. To sum up, a critic must be able to do three things: (1) write as well as any writer, creative or critical; (2) be a good teacher and enjoy being a teacher, because the critic continues your education after you have left the classroom; and (3) be a thinker, looking out at the world and reflecting on it, philosophizing about it—for one has to have a view of life as well as a view of theatre.

BC: Do you like the theatre?

JS: I love it. No one gets involved with theatre if he doesn't love the theatre. And it is important to express that love, even—or especially—in negative reviews. To translate from the Latin: "Who loves well, castigates well." I subscribe to that. Ferocious writing is a love of writing, as well as of the theatre. Let me add that I think it is good for a writer to be in love a lot, which I have been throughout my adult life.

BC: Do you ever get depressed when you have one bad theatregoing experience after another?

JS: Sort of. The thing is that after a while you develop a strong stomach and a thick hide. I'm originally from the Balkans, and people from that region are tough cookies. We don't have weak stomachs and thin skins, and we don't try to be nice to everyone. And with a strong stomach and a thick hide, you can face almost anything. That doesn't mean you're happy to face it, but you do it. Remember, I occupy the seat on the aisle, not the "death seat," which is the seat next to mine: it's occupied by the person who gets dragged to the theatre with the critic and doesn't get the satisfaction of getting even with the damned thing—the bad play or production—afterward.

BC: Did you create the persona of "John Simon" at *New York Magazine*?

JS: People have accused me of that. I'm able to be myself, which some people consider outrageous, other people consider daring, other people consider honest and forthright. And so perhaps a persona grew out of all this, especially since my attacks were sharp. I tried to be funny. And when an attack is funny, it hurts. Most criticism in the theatre and in music, too, is so mild, so unaggressive and so namby-pamby, and because most of those who write it don't have a sense

of artistic background, or their own personality, or my Balkan tradition behind them, they're not very sharp, not very tough, not very critical. They're too mild to be critics. I'm not mild. That makes me stand out. Mind you, I don't set out to be vicious. You try to be just, and you try to be entertaining, and where those two things meet is the locus of the review. If viciousness happens occasionally to be the by-product, so be it.

BC: You wrote in one of your books, "The true critic is a visionary. He sees somewhere deep inside himself an ideal play, a perfect production, a flawless performance." How then do you evaluate new work?

JS: When you see a play, you've heard what it's about. In many cases, you know the actors, the director, the producer. You sort of know what to expect. And you expect the best possible. You have an idea, and out of that idea you build a fantasy, and sometimes it's fulfilled, but very often it's not. You always do end up judging the thing against some sort of principle, some system of belief. Here's a reverse principle of sorts: in the last twenty years or so, directors have become authors of the plays they direct. Which is to say they make up a whole different scenario. If the play says a desert island, they put it in a railway station!

BC: But without "crazy" directors, wouldn't we be watching the same production over and over? Times change, people change.

JS: After all, any individual brings something new to the production, if he is the director or the main actor. There are no two ways that you can play Hamlet that are identical. Suppose you say to a stage designer, "Now here I want a rococo palace." Every designer's idea of a rococo palace will be different. And that will create a difference. But the people who want a rococo palace to become a modern skyscraper are full of shit. That kind of difference is nonsensical.

BC: I see what you mean, but I'm willing to say to the director, do what you will. I don't want to proscribe. By saying stick faithfully to the text, you may be eliminating incredible ideas.

JS: I find these incredible ideas very distasteful—masturbatory and misleading and dishonest. I see the director as a person who has to defend the author's rights to his play. The director is not there to rewrite the author.

BC: But you could have done everything faithfully to the playwright's intention and it could still be deadly. That's no insurance.

JS: Of course. In the arts there's no insurance of any kind. It's always a risk. If you're doing a brand-new play, the risk is you may be doing a piece of junk. Or you may be doing *King Lear*, but the way you do it, it may come out awful. Nothing is a guarantee. Art is a very tricky business.

BC: You see so much. I sometimes wonder if critics see too much.

JS: The one rule, I think, is you must come to every play—whether it's one you've seen fifty-five times before or one you've never seen before—you must come to it with a kind of freshness, a kind of openness, a kind of willingness, if it is at all possible, to like it. I think I've never lost the willingness to like, to be surprised, to be entertained.

BC: Let's talk for a moment about your judgments of women performers.

JS: The first qualification in women for me is that they should be "lookable at." If they're unsightly beyond belief, I don't care how good their acting is.

BC: What if the part doesn't demand beauty?

JS: There are no parts that don't demand beauty of a kind. With men, it doesn't seem quite so important. Largeness in a man bespeaks masculinity, whereas fatness in a woman bespeaks the opposite of femininity. So I think a man can get away with size better. Which is not to say that one wouldn't rather look at an elegant-looking male actor than at some huge, tubby one—unless he's playing Falstaff. Then it works.

BC: But aren't there other elements that come into play? Grace of movement, expressiveness?

JS: There are. Yes. But you have to begin at the beginning. Certain things are non-negotiable, and you have to start with them.

BC: Where do these ideas of yours come from?

JS: I'm an aesthetician. I believe in beauty in all its forms. Whether it's beauty of sound, beauty of movement, beauty of face, beauty of body, beautiful scenery, beautiful costumes. I think beauty is a prerequisite. If you don't have beauty, you have nothing.

BC: Do you draw any sort of line between what is legitimate criticism and

what is an insult? What you just said was not really criticism, it was an insult.

JS: It's an insult based on something tangible. If I say that she has the foulest breath in the world without my having been close enough to smell her breath, then it's an insult without meaning.

BC: You're saying these insults are based on your perceptions?

JS: I happen to think that my perception is better than somebody else's perception. I may be wrong, but I shall go to my grave believing it.

BC: Instead of insulting her, isn't there a way to couch your criticism or say she's miscast?

JS: No! Because that's cowardly, evasive, dishonest, and ineffectual. If you are saying something, you have to say it strongly. It has to catch the reader's eye; it has to stick in his mind. I think if something insults me by being badly written or badly acted or badly sung or badly staged, I have every right to insult it back! Because I think that's the only way I can keep my sanity. I'm not a masochist. I don't want to be kicked in the groin and do nothing about it.

BC: Well, you certainly don't seem to censor yourself.

JS: I won't censor myself but other people sometimes try to censor me.

BC: Oh, really?

JS: It has happened occasionally, not often.

BC: So, to sum up, you feel it's fair game to "review" someone's physical attributes.

JS: Of course it's fair game because the performer is the sum total of all the things he is. He's not just a voice, he's not just the way he walks, he's not the way he reads his lines. Although he is all of that, he is also how he looks or how she looks. Then you say, well it's not someone's fault if he or she looks in some way that isn't very attractive or doesn't please your particular taste. But you can do a lot of things. You can use make-up perhaps. You can use your demeanor to somehow soften what's wrong with you. But above all, you could have charm. There may be things that cannot be mitigated, however, especially if you look totally wrong for the part.

BC: Has an angry actor ever written to you about one of your comments?

JS: I'm not sure. The only obvious *action* is the famous Sylvia Miles case when she threw a plate of steak tartare at me. That was angry. There was one other incident, somewhat similar but less meaty. Letters, I don't know. There have been some anonymous letters occasionally, which may have been from actors. Actors have to take their lumps, and if critics are their lumps, that's how it is. I can't be concerned with what people think of my work, whether they "hate" me, etc.; all that is immaterial.

BC: If you really like a show and you sort of want to support it, do you ever intentionally write in a way to give the production a quote for their ads?

JS: No. You may have noticed that even when I like things, I'm quoted far, far less often than others. This is partly because they resent me and they don't want to quote me. If they can get anybody else, they prefer that. And I don't blame them. If you dispute a critic's views, why should you quote him? I write for the sake of the writing and not for the sake of the quoting.

BC: You've talked in your reviews about the hysterical audience reactions around you. Could you elaborate on this subject?

JS: Nowadays there's a standing ovation on any night for anything. I think that's really bad. It has made the standing ovation worthless. It has made real excellence undistinguishable from God knows what else and it sort of debases the currency of an ovation and it's depressing. It has come to the point where, many times, I would rather review the audience than the show because the show is pretty terrible and can be done in one paragraph. But the benightedness of audiences? That requires a great deal of contemplation and evaluation. The trouble is you can't. I mean, even in the most liberal publication, I don't think they'd tolerate you, saying that the audience is hopelessly deluded or self-deluded.

BC: You've been known to reprimand audience members around you.

JS: Yes, certainly, but I wish I could somehow prevent them from giving standing ovations. And also from hooting. That hooting thing is awful! People don't know the difference between an extreme sports event and a piece of theatre, which potentially can be a work of art. The difference between an extremely violent wrestling match and a play on Broadway has become eroded. The audiences go in the same spirit to both events.

BC: What do you think people would be surprised to learn about you? You obviously have quite a reputation.

JS: The thing that's happened over and over again is that people have met me and found me not biting off their noses, and then they think what a nice person I am in real life as opposed to what I am on the page. I always say, why should I be the way I write a review if I'm talking to you at a cocktail party? Those are two different things. What they can't understand is that someone who is not a Godzilla monster can actually exist and still write tough reviews. And of course, it's possible. You can be a reasonably normal human being and not like every damned show that comes down the pike.

BC: Robert Brustein said he deplored his early harsh criticism, whose style he thought you copied. When he started working in the theatre, he explained, he began to understand the difficulty of making theatre.

JS: Look, I haven't copied anybody's style. Whatever virtues or vices I have are my own. By becoming an actor, director, playwright, and producer, Brustein has betrayed his critical self. John Lahr is another example of such an "unfaithful" critic—I wouldn't give you two cents for one of his reviews. You cannot be both the butcher and the ox that's being butchered.

BC: That's not true in literature. Reviewers are often novelists or poets who review other novels or poetry collections.

JS: It's not a good idea. Novelists are always much too easy on other novelists. A critic should be a critic and nothing else. Of course you should be as erudite as possible, as experienced in the ways of the world as possible. But you should not be a novelist or playwright or whatever.

BC: But there's a tradeoff, isn't there? Because you're losing the expertise of the practitioner?

JS: I think you're wrong. What is to be brought to criticism is this: you should have good literary taste, and you should have a sense of good writing versus bad writing. I happen to think that being a critic is a full-time, legitimate occupation; and, just as you don't ask an architect whether he can also lay bricks, you shouldn't ask a critic if he can also write plays. Those are different occupations, and it is silly to argue that a critic is unqualified or less qualified if he can't himself pen a drama. Actually, I don't know if I could or couldn't write a play, and I'm not

interested in doing so, in any event. I will reveal a secret to you, though: I am very grateful—*very* grateful—that I started out in life as a poet.

BC: I think there's a sense among playwrights and other theatre people that critics are always about twenty years behind the times in what is happening in the art.

JS: There's a little something to that, but less than meets the eye. People who are saying that are terribly involved with the present for whatever reason, and they don't have a good knowledge of the tradition of the past or of history. So, yes, the critics may be behind the times in that they don't go into ecstasies over the latest hit play, but I think that is their great virtue. Of course, there are bad critics who attack new things just because they're new. I think good critics appreciate the good aspects of the new but do not fall all over themselves appreciating what isn't there.

BC: What are the trends—with regard to styles, subjects, and playwrights—that have been positive in the theatre in New York, as well as abroad, during the forty-to-fifty years you have been a critic?

JS: I don't look at or trust trends: they come and go. They are not what matters from an historical point of view; ultimately what matters is the quality that lies beneath the surface trend, what the work is trying to say—be that work old-fashioned or avant-garde—and how well it says it. Naturalism, surrealism, absurdism: those styles are all equally acceptable to me. The real question is, what does the dramatist do with the particular style, how successful is he in employing it?

BC: Which theatre critics do you like?

JS: That's a hard question to answer. I used to think Brustein was very good in his younger days. But, these days, I do not think much of most of my colleagues.

BC: What about some younger person writing today?

JS: It's a bad age for criticism.

BC: Why?

JS: Whatever the reasons, I prefer not to dwell on them; I want to continue writing good criticism as long as I can.

BC: Is it a bad age for drama?

JS: However bad the drama, it's not helped by all the prizes it gets. The Pulitzer, for example, has become the affirmative-action prize—especially when it's given, as it was in 2003, to a no-talent like Nilo Cruz for *Anna in the Tropics*. I've always thought the Pulitzer was the worst prize in existence and I've said it to one of the Pulitzers himself in St. Louis. Let's face it—all prizes, starting with the Nobel, are questionable. But some are worse than questionable. Some are appalling. I think this one always has been and always will be.

BC: Do you believe that there are years when we simply shouldn't award Pulitzers or Tonys?

JS: Oh, very much so. I mean, all awards should always hold open the option of not giving an award. But unfortunately there is a perception that an award must be given and if what's competing is, let's say, horse shit, goat shit, pig shit, and dog shit, well, one of those shits has to win no matter what. I think that's a very poor idea.

BC: Have you ever been guilty of overpraise?

JS: I may have been a little overgenerous here and there. You know, after you have to knock a lot of things, you begin to look desperately for something to praise and if there is no really wonderful thing around, you end up overpraising something that's only slightly better. I guess you could call this an occupational hazard.

BC: Some consider you a homophobe, based on your reviews of gay plays or your comments about homosexual characters. Your response?

JS: Well, let me put it this way: I do not like uniforms. I do not like people who are a professional this, that, or the other. Professional writers, actors, or singers are okay, but I don't like professional Jews, professional homosexuals, professional blacks, professional feminists, professional patriots. I don't like people abdicating their identity to become part of some group, and then becoming obsessed with this and making capital of it. I mean, somebody like Elie Wiesel, for example, who appropriates the Holocaust and makes a cottage industry out of it. I find that extremely distasteful.

BC: If you were to label yourself, what would it be?

JS: I like to think that I don't have a label. I'm open-minded. I'm willing to see good or bad wherever I find it. The person whose work you hated many times may come up with a masterpiece. And the person you think is wonderful may come

up with a real piece of garbage. So you have to have an open mind.

BC: But there's a contradiction here. If you, John Simon, go to the theatre, and you're prejudiced against fat women—to return to the subject of women and their looks—and you could never like a fat woman in a role you consider unsuitable for her, you're closing off a part of yourself that could never be surprised by that.

JS: I can be surprised, and probably there will be a time when a fat woman is so talented and so brilliant that even though the part doesn't call for her fatness, she gets away with it. That's fine. I'm for that.

BC: What about a woman who is incredibly beautiful yet untalented. Are you always seduced by beauty?

JS: No. Beauty is what you begin with. If a very beautiful woman is untalented, I may say it's worth going just to look at her.

BC: You seem to be much harder on women than you are on men.

JS: That's because I love women. That is why I'm hard on them. They mean so much to me. If they get it right, they're the noblest things on earth as far as I'm concerned. God's greatest gift to mankind is a beautiful woman who is intelligent.

BC: The word I hear is "things." Does that mean you're objectifying women?

JS: That's just a turn of phrase. I also used the word intelligent, and "things" are not intelligent. A very beautiful woman, whom I once took to the theatre and had dinner with, Genevieve Bujold, said to me, "You love women too much, John. You should beware. Women are not nice people."

BC: Yes. Women are human beings, not things.

JS: She meant more than that. Women are dangerous and nasty.

BC: Sure. Just like men.

JS: No! Not like men! Worse than men! That was her point. I'm not saying she was right. It was an interesting point. I'm always severe with the people I love. And because I care about myself, I'm especially hard on myself. I try only to publish a review that I've really gotten right. So, to finish up with this subject: I am stricter with women because they mean more to me, yet from a beautiful man I also get

something. But I'm not as aware of it—I'm not as responsive to it. Or sensitive to it. I've certainly enjoyed some fine-looking actors. Peter Finch, for example. Laurence Olivier. In his prime, Robert Redford was good-looking. Some men are fascinating-looking without being good-looking.

BC: Yes! I think women are like that, too.

JS: Yes. There are some women like that. I can come up with a few. There is the kind of woman who has a nice, ordinary look. If she walked by you on the street, you wouldn't notice her, but when she gets on a stage, she is breathtaking. It's not done with looks. It's done with everything else. That is true greatness, when you can transcend the obvious things and be lifted up into another sphere.

BC: How long does it take you to write your reviews?

JS: Not very long. Because I'm the fastest gun in the west, or rather the east. I amaze other people by the speed at which I write.

BC: Do you take notes?

JS: Very few. And the older I get, the fewer. The notes are usually a line of dialogue or a description of a horrible costume.

BC: Do you compose on a typewriter?

JS: Oh, God forbid. I have a collection of gorgeous pens, and I write with those. Then I type it or with the help of my wife, I'm able to put it into a computer.

BC: Do you do several drafts?

JS: Oh, no. I don't do any drafts at all. I just write them.

BC: You compose in your head first?

JS: No. Until I write it down on the paper, it doesn't exist. Pauline Kael was the same way. I write in longhand. As I type, I make a few changes. When it's all typed up, I may fix a little thing here and there.

BC: Maybe you write so easily because your opinions are so strong. It's easier to write from some kind of a passion, whether it's love or hate.

JS: Maybe. But I'm equally fast about a play that I'm totally indifferent to. So there's no passion involved at all. It has to do with a kind of facility. For example, I read very slowly. I don't have that facility. I practically write faster than I read.

BC: How does John Simon refuel during the summer?

JS: I don't know. I do music criticism, which is a very different kind of operation. I do classical CDs, mostly—I love classical music, and every time I have to give a tough review in the theatre I can write a piece about some wonderful CDs, so that is always restorative. My wife and I don't travel very much, for various reasons. I would enjoy traveling more, but somehow that doesn't seem to work out. And, well, my wife has an apartment in Bronxville. To me, a congenital urbanite, suburbia *is* the country. So there's that. Summer isn't all that different from the rest of the year except that there are fewer plays. On the other hand, there still *are* plays because that old business of the summer being a dead season is no longer true.

BC: I'd like to discuss now your latest book, *John Simon on Theatre*, which is a collection of your criticism from 1974 to 2003. And I'd like to begin by reading a small section from the beginning. This is an author's note, placed right before the table of contents: "Times change, the saying goes, and we change with them. I have kept these reviews unchanged for historical reasons, but for the same reasons I must warn the reader that some of my present views have evolved in different directions. That change is reflected in certain later reviews, some of which did not make it into this book, and continues as I keep living and learning. Though I am no spring chicken, I hope that Applause [the book's publisher] will some day bring out another collection before I am a dead duck—a book that might surprise the old John Simon no less than the old John Simon reader." As you prepared this book for publication, what was it like to reexamine all of the work that you've written over the past thirty years?

JS: Well, it was actually a pleasant surprise. Famously, Jonathan Swift, in a similar situation, exclaimed, "What genius I had, *then*." I didn't feel I had any special genius then, *vis-à-vis* any special genius I might have now, but I was pleasantly surprised that the stuff was quite good and that I had no complaints.

BC: But in this author's note you suggest that you have changed over time, and I'm wondering whether there are opinions you held then that you don't necessarily hold now. Where do you think the most marked changes have occurred?

JS: For example, about Stephen Sondheim I have become more positive

than I used to be. Some people have questioned me about that and I said, “Look, I was wrong in my younger days. I wasn’t quite ready for him then, and now I am.” Now I am much more appreciative of Sondheim’s work, about which I was pretty scathing in the past. His stuff was much better than I made it out to be, and something like *Follies*, along with *Pal Joey*, I think is probably one of the two or three top musicals in American theatre history.

BC: What do you think made you change your mind?

JS: Getting older, wiser, more mature. Hearing his stuff again and again and again, realizing I was wrong, and not being ashamed to admit it.

BC: If you were to take a close look at some of your early reviews—those of Sondheim as well as others—are there any of them that you would go back and rewrite?

JS: As I point out in that prefatory note to *John Simon on Theatre*, I don’t believe in such re-writing. I think what you can do is, you can use a future occasion to amend your previous position, and the next time you review something by such-and-such, you can say, “When I reviewed his earlier play, what’s-its-name, I was wrong,” or something of that sort. I think that whatever you once said and what first got into print should remain the way it was for historical reasons. This is how wise or unwise this critic was at the time, and this is how much he has evolved or changed his mind. And perhaps he’s wrong now and maybe he was right then.

BC: In the introduction to your new collection of theatre criticism, Jack O’Brien, the noted American theatre director, writes, “Simon has said repeatedly that a critic speaks merely for himself, for his own taste.” How do you define your taste?

JS: That is hard to do; perhaps other people could do it better than I can. I think my taste is good, and beyond good taste and bad taste, I don’t make any differentiations. But, of course, what is good taste is a question of aesthetics, and a rather complex one at that: books have been written about it, so I couldn’t do it justice in a few words. Nonetheless, I think it has to do with having been well-educated, having been brought up well, having been exposed to a lot of things—including art but not limited to art—having read a lot, having traveled widely, having talked to numerous intelligent and knowledgeable people. Out of all of this you fashion your taste, which you hope is good.

BC: You have often praised shows that weren’t necessarily the most intellectual or the most challenging, but instead were small in scale or modest in ambition. You

seemed to be praising them because they achieved what they set out to achieve, on their own terms.

JS: Yes, I think you should evaluate each production, first of all, on what it tries to be, and second—some critics don't include this, which I believe is wrong—on whether what it tries to be is worth being. However modest, however "small" a production, however poor its financial resources, if it has a worthy aim and accomplishes that aim, it should be respected and lauded as much as any other production.

BC: Here's Jack O'Brien again, writing in the introduction to *John Simon on Theatre*: "You couldn't simply dismiss a Simon review if it were a pan, and you couldn't smugly share in the joy were it a rave. John was always too far ahead of the class, outstripping everyone else in knowledge, history, reference, and that one element without which any critic can be dismissed as merely a reviewer: he had standards." What are John Simon's standards?

JS: Again, it's hard to put that into a few words. As we've already discussed, having standards means having good taste, being able to write well, being one's own strictest critic—that is, applying critical standards to your own work as well as to works of art—and never allowing anything hasty, sloppy, or poorly conceived to get into print.

BC: Here is O'Brien's next sentence: "They are standards of authenticity, of beauty, of skill required, of pronunciation, grammar, even—God help us—line-readings, all of which he could summon up, rifle through, reference, and apply without hesitation, and with an almost infuriating accuracy."

JS: That's lovely. If what he says is true, then I have truly accomplished what I set out to do.

BC: How did you decide which of your many reviews, over a period of three decades, made it into your current collection?

JS: I tried to pick my reviews of plays that are still being revived all over the United States, if not the world; to select reviews that had something special to say apart from my judgment on the individual play itself; reviews that were longer and therefore more thoughtful, more abundant; those reviews that were wittier and more fun to read; et cetera, ad infinitum. A lot of pieces had to be omitted, regrettably, because the book length was pared down by the publisher from 1200 pages to 830 or so.

BC: How long do you see yourself writing reviews?

JS: As long as they're willing to publish me, I'm willing to write them. Obviously, if I go blind or deaf or senile or become bed-bound, I'll stop. But as long as I have my brains—and they seem to be, as yet, unimpaired—and as long as I have my physical health and my interest, I will go on. If they stop publishing me, then I'll stop. But I can't say this will happen at such and such a time. I still feel very much in the saddle, and while I'm in the saddle, I'll ride.

