

Roundtable: Part II

Some Theatre Concerns Voiced by Leading LA Editors and Critics

Photos by Chris Kane

In the last issue of *LA Stage*, we met six editors and/or critics from various leading publications which provide a steady voice to theatre in Los Angeles. We pick up the conversation where we left off during a luncheon at the Off Vine Restaurant.

The panelists included Lisa Fung, Editor of the *Los Angeles Times* Calendar; Dany Margolies, Executive Editor and Critic for *Back Stage West*; Charles McNulty, Chief Theatre Critic for the *Los Angeles Times*; Steven Leigh Morris, Theatre Editor and Critic for *LA Weekly*; Hugo Quintana, Editor and Critic of *La Opinion*; and Don Shirley, Theatre Critic for *LA CityBeat* and *ValleyBeat*. Sasha Anawalt, Director of Arts Journalism Fellowship Programs at USC Annenberg School of Communications, moderated. *-Lee Melville*

Anawalt: If you wrote a play, is there a theatre, say one that espouses artistic vision, where you would hope to have it done?

Morris: I don't think any of us can answer that. Every play is a different event. Even in a given theatre the quality goes up and down so that's an impossible question.

McNulty: One of the things I've noticed is that often I'll see a play and think, well you know this would've fit better in another space. I think that's an issue in LA you can discuss a bit more. I don't know what would come out of such a discussion but I've had the feeling often since I've been here. I think part of the issue is just that there are many houses with 99-seats and under, and there are many large theatres, but the size in between those two is not as common. So I think that's a real challenge.

Shirley: Well, we have a lot more midsize theatres than we used to have. Steven and I, actually, had a little bit of a dialogue over the years in print because I consider myself a great champion of midsize theatres, and Steven is the great champion of the 99-seat theatres. I think it's vital for Los Angeles to support theatres that pay a living wage to the actors and yet which are not barns. The midsize theatres are esthetically the perfect balance between so many factors, and I wish LA would support the midsize theatres more than it does.

Morris: If we had serious arts funding I would agree but the pressures put on those midsize theatres to pay Equity wages cuts right into the quality of the kinds of plays they select.

Anawalt: Does the size of a theatre have anything to do with how you decide what you're going to cover?

Margolies: We try to cover as much as possible but space is always the final frontier. I'd say the key issue right now is determining what we cover. If it's another national tour of *The Lion King*, we're sorry to have to turn it down, even though there are lots of actors. When you're *Back Stage*, of course, it's the actors' trade paper. We would have to pass that by in favor of giving space to a smaller theatre where local actors are being hired. If a midsize theatre is doing a production we're

interested in, we'll be there. Small theatres, as much as possible, we'll be there.

Quintana: I think the most important thing of all is what attracts you. Something says to you, "Oh, what is this? How is this possible?" And I discover wonderful things that are so refreshing. Usually there is more than one reviewer in your paper. I am it.

Shirley: I am also it.

Quintana: Oh, okay. Good. So we go to what we think is good theatre.

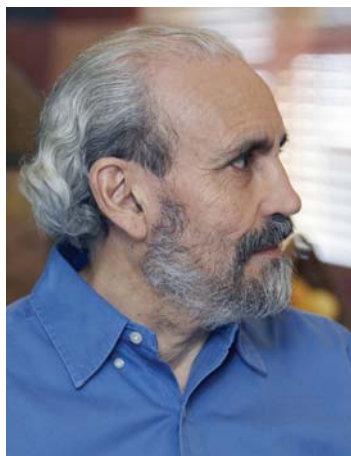
Shirley: If there were two events of equal interest, artistically, one in a 99-seat theatre and one in a midsize or larger theatre I'd probably go to the larger one first because I just think it has potential to reach more people.

McNulty: I wish the schedule of openings was coordinated a little bit more than it is. I think that's a real challenge for LA because why should we have to choose? Often I don't know how to choose. I want to go to both or to all, and it's a very frustrating experience. In LA we are invited to openings and have to file by the next morning, for the most part. In New York, for example, the critics get invited several days before the opening and can write their review over a number of days whereas I get home at 11:00 and have to file by 11:00 in the morning at the latest. The quality of critical response would be enhanced if we had more time, if we could polish our thoughts. I often come back from an evening out at the theatre, and the response I have is complicated; it's never a thumbs up or a thumbs down. It's too complex an experience for that sort of response. I have to instantly start writing, and you discover your thoughts, your opinion as you're writing. I wish I had time then to go back over it and to refine the way in which that opinion is conveyed. It is in the interest of the theatre community from the larger institutions like CTG and Geffen to rethink this policy. It's something I've been advocating since I've been out here, and it's largely because I think we're attempting to meet artists on their own terms as writers. It's not always so instantly obvious. I don't know how you feel at this point.

Morris: No, I agree with you completely. We're under increasing pressure with the internet and with the availability of next day runs to turn things around more quickly.



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Shirley: I don't know who needs this reminder but to anyone out there who is reading this article, please do not ask critics what we think of the show while we're still at the theatre. And it's for all the reasons that Charles was just outlining. We don't know what we think about the show until we sit down to write it, and even then until we're finished writing.

McNulty: And discovering. I think what we do is very similar to what actors do on stage, trying to get in touch with their feelings. That is not something you can just do instantly, you need some time. How often I ask myself, what do you really think? What do you need just to communicate? I'm trying to get to something beyond the inclination, beyond the instantaneous opinion. To do that you have to tunnel it to your style and interact with yourself in a way that I think should be given more time.

Morris: Charles said the acting process is one of discovery. I echo that from a slightly different perspective. It's almost like a playwright's process. I think of what Edward Albee said. I asked him why he writes plays and he said, "I write plays to figure out why I'm writing this play." In a way that's exactly what we're doing. We're in the process of writing. We're trying to figure out how this all works and how it comes together. That's not an instant process. If we have any respect for the form at all we understand there are multiple components to the design elements for which theatre it's in. So it is a process of discovery. That does take time if it's going to be done right.

Quintana: Because of space problems we have to publish a theatre review on a day there is space available because we only have four pages.

Fung: The reader is asking, "Where is that review? I was there last night. Why isn't it in my paper?"

Margolies: We talk about needing time to reflect and process, and do an excellent job bringing a review to the page. How soon into a performance do any of us start making judgments?

Morris: About a minute.

LAUGHTER

Margolies: And isn't that an interesting process where all of a sudden you start seeing quality, yes or no, competent...

Morris: You can assess what's going on...

Shirley: You could change your mind.

Morris: Absolutely.

Quintana: I want people to go to the theatre. I try to offer them a role in the theatre, try to make it so interesting they might go. I do tell things that were not good in the show or if it was completely terrible, but the reviews are about six inches so I pick out what is good. What are you going to find there if you go? I'm trying to open a window for them, and I do it with knowledge.

Anawalt: Hugo, at *LA Opinion*, how much Spanish-speaking theatre do you cover?

Quintana: Most of the theatre we review is in English because Spanish theatre is one play every four months in one theatre, and in another, maybe, six more plays in a whole year.

McNulty: I always enter an experience very hopeful in the sense I want it to be good. It's an overwhelming feeling. In my years of going to the theatre I'm aware there is often in the beginning of a performance an awkward phase where the actors are still adjusting to the lights and to being before an audience again, even experienced actors, so it often takes a play or a performance piece a little bit of time to get into gear. Then soon

after, you have a sense of what you think. There could be an actor who comes on the scene and makes you rethink everything that's come before. So you still are hopeful. You're still open-minded. I have learned to be very forgiving about the immediate things of performance because I find that's when it's often at its most awkward.

Anawalt: I went to see a play the other night that was in its closing weeks and it was just humming. People in the lobby said, "It's gotten so much better in the eight weeks it's been up," and of course it has. Many of these plays run for a long amount of time. You have that generosity of experience that your views can influence people where to go over a period of time.

Shirley: Unfortunately, we don't have the luxury of going back most of the time.

Anawalt: Do you ever think about it or do you hear, "Oh, such and such got even better?"

Shirley: Well, I've shared the experience of going late in the run and finding that something was working beautifully when it got bad reviews. I question why but obviously something improved.

Margolies: I have gone back to shows at the end of runs and I have gone to see other casts. I don't see that much of a change. I guess I go back because it was a good show in the first place. So I see it again.

Morris: The other thing is sometimes, it's happening less and less frequently, I'll actually see a play twice before filing a review. It's amazing to get all those impressions and you realize your initial perception was a little wrong or it was skewed. It's just very different.

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-Steven Leigh Morris



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-Lisa Fung



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-Don Shirley



Shirley: Charles, how do you feel about the reader reviews that are posted on the LA Times website?

McNulty: I look to this as missed opportunity to be honest. I'd like to see it become more active than it is. I'd like more people to use it as a forum for their opinions. I feel there's got to be a way to make it more of a dialogue. I also feel we should require the name and email address of the individual. There should be a check on what's allowed because things published on their sites often seem to be not just a candid response but a theatre response, like somebody affiliated with the production. That diminishes the honesty yet it's a great resource that should be more fully utilized and expanded but some sort of check needs to be in place so we know this is an individual with no affiliation who is putting himself out there as a member of the community.

Shirley: Aren't there fewer letters to the editor than there used to be? I think people are doing the readers' responses on the website instead. What do you think, Lisa?

Fung: I think we print fewer.

McNulty: I like the Times' policy of having our email printed at the bottom of our articles. It's a wonderful thing. I welcomed the dialogue with my readers. I respond to everybody who writes. If I can have an opportunity to communicate a little bit of my journey in that review, I'm happy to do so. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that people who do what we do are human beings as well and that it is painful, to me, to pan a show. I don't get a great pleasure out of that experience but I would have

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more pain if I was not honest. So that’s the balance with which we’re all trying to contend.

Morris: To be honest ambassadors.

McNulty: Yeah, to be honest ambassadors. The critic Richard Gilman said he owed something more to the art form and to honesty than he did to institutions and individual artists. I think that’s something we need to uphold as much as we need to be aware that human beings are behind those institutions and behind those works of art. I think our calling is to the art form and learning how to serve that is very challenging. What you write does affect human beings and you need to be aware of the effect of your words. So I think that’s part of it but your eye ultimately should be on the art form.

Anawalt: How do you all feel about that—the eye on the art form? Do you hear from the institutions and the individuals?

Fung: Yes, frequently. All want their production covered and on the cover and they want a positive review. They want to be able to pick reviewers.

Quintana: Seeing it from another point of view, if a producer knows so and so is not going to like his show, he wants to choose a writer who will give it a better review by saying so and so might not understand what we are doing.

Fung: A certain reviewer will not like something Andrew Lloyd Webber does so I’m not going to send that person in to review a production. That wouldn’t make sense. It wouldn’t serve my readers. There are some people who are bold enough to ask that you not send someone... “We would rather not be reviewed than...”

Shirley: Do you want to use the word bold or do you want to use the word foolish?

LAUGHTER

Shirley: Your inclination is to do exactly the opposite in that case, isn’t it? If they come right out with it and are frank with it and say, please don’t send this person. Doesn’t that put you in a real bind?

Fung: Actually, I tend not to respond to that. It’s not for them to be making the decision.

Anawalt: And I’m sure there are critics they hope they get, people who they suspect might be gentler.

Fung: Right, exactly. They may say, this person

does not get our theatre, so we would rather have so and so, who should get it. But even when we have not paid attention to what they’ve said, and send in the person they didn’t want there, sometimes even I’m surprised of what people come up with. I think there is this assumption that, based on a few productions or a few reviews, a critic has a certain world-view, and I just don’t think it’s true. I think it’s a safe assumption: “So and so doesn’t like musicals.” I’ve heard that a couple of times.

Morris: Or “Would you please send such and such a critic who is of a certain ethnicity because they can review our certain show.”

Fung: I’ve heard that often. What is the argument for that and against that?

Morris: The argument for it is that such and such a critic may have a richness of experience in the culture the play is representing and therefore may be more qualified to cover it. The opposing argument is that the theatre is supposedly for the general audience, which may be a misperception because it may be just that community that is going to see that play, but we try not to operate on that assumption; therefore, we see what’s out there and how it speaks to someone from the other side of that ethnic border. That would be the other argument. Presumptions, even our own presumptions, which we think we hold about ourselves, can be challenged. I went to a show that had been aggressively seeking a review from us. I went for convenience because I knew I was going to be out of town the whole weekend so I went on an early weekday to see a one-person show and it turned out to be a rich and rewarding experience. Again, when do the judgments come in? I knew 30 seconds in that this was going to be a special event. So we have to challenge our own prejudices as well as ask the community to do the same with us.

Quintana: I have problems with people writing to me or calling me and saying, “Hey, such and such paper gave me a better review than you did and I am a Chicano, what are you talking about?” I think there is an expectation and some people play on that. This is about art, not about what a better critic I’m going to be if I write something good about Mexican-Americans.

Anawalt: And on that note, we’ve come to the end of our time. Thank you. It’s great to get together. ■