

Another 300 Openings, Another 300 Shows

By Don Shirley

THE MEN IN THE WHITE COATS should be here soon. Oh well — I'm sure I can count on the kindness of strangers.

Such thoughts hit me as John Lahr, the brilliant theater critic of *The New Yorker*, answered questions at REDCAT as part of the recent USC/NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Theater and Musical Theater. Lahr was asked about burnout among theater critics.

"They go to too many shows," he replied. Then he offered this medical opinion: "It would rot your brain pan to go to a hundred plays a year."

Hmm. Last year I saw more than 300 plays. Am I certifiable?

Prior to 2006, I had never seen productions this frequently. When I covered theater for the *Los Angeles Times*, I saw at least a hundred plays a year but only once did I surpass 200.

My theatergoing increased last year, after I took a *Times* buyout and became the critic for *LA CityBeat* and *ValleyBeat*. As a young weekly newspaper/web site (born in 2003), *CityBeat* hadn't run theater commentary regularly. But its editors agreed that something named *LA CityBeat* should reflect the abundance and the variety of LA's theater in each edition. Because I'm the only writer on the theater beat for *CityBeat*, I see as many shows as possible.

I'm in a theater every Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening, and on Sunday afternoons. I'm usually there on Saturday afternoons and Sunday evenings, although sometimes these performance slots don't offer many options. I see some Wednesday evening openings and Rubicon Theatre's Wednesday matinees. Occasionally something attracts me on a Monday or Tuesday.

I normally discuss at least two shows in my column, focusing on a common element. The only editorial constraint is that the essay can't exceed 650 words. A lot of the shows I see don't make the column. But each of them gets a brief, opinionated summary in the theater listings—and each week one show is dubbed "Critic's Choice," meriting a bigger listing. *CityBeat*'s "Continuing" theater listings usually consist only of the shows I've seen (sometimes these are trimmed in print but the complete version remains online).

So the heat is on. If performances are taking place somewhere yet I'm not in a theater, I might feel a twinge of guilt. But I seldom feel symptoms of burnout.

I look forward to escaping those productions I can't stand. But these are relatively rare. Generally I enjoy uniting with other people, both onstage and in the audience, and focusing on something in theatrical terms, even if it isn't perfect.

Besides, I can't see everything. In LA, Orange and Ventura counties, there are probably 1500 productions every year that would qualify as professional. So I, too, have to make choices. Although the selection process isn't foolproof, it eliminates most of the total stinkers.

But don't I get tired of the driving and sitting? I drive a hybrid—and my driving doesn't fall into

regular commuting ruts. Theatergoing from sitting at home, watching TV. I indulge in naps and coffee to help me stay alert. If I see two or three shows in

one day, my tush might eventually feel it. But I live close to a gym, and on most days I spend some time there. Although my wife or a friend usually accompanies me once or twice a week, I often go to theaters alone—and it doesn't bother me.

Of course most people couldn't afford my theatergoing habit. I couldn't either, if critics didn't receive comp tickets. I don't feel conflicted about this standard perk. I also appreciate that publicists will sometimes furnish the script (via e-mail or hard copy) for reference after I've seen the show. It usually eliminates the need to take notes and helps me devote my full attention to the stage.

If I had to write as much copy about individual shows as Lahr apparently feels he must, burnout might strike sooner. Judging from his other comments at REDCAT, Lahr would see my writing as superficial. I would reply that, like it or not, most readers today appear to lack the attention span for longer commentaries—and few critics have his luxury of writing so expansively. Even within my limited space, I try to avoid reflexive thumbs-up, thumbs-down verdicts. But sometimes the lack of space prohibits anything deep.

On the other hand, I see Lahr's attitude toward theatergoing as superficial. He told the REDCAT crowd that he usually sees the works of artists he already knows, and that he might not be young enough to appreciate some of today's cutting-edge work. He further added this fillip: "Maybe you think it's a terrible thing to say but my view is if it's not in *The New Yorker*, it's not in the culture."

He's right—that sounds terrible. A critic should regularly scan the field for promising but previously unknown artists. Like Lahr, I regret I lack the time to see very brief runs. I have to concentrate on productions that will still be running when next week's *CityBeat* emerges. However, to paraphrase the title of a Lahr book, every critic should "prick up his ears" at the possibility something worthy might not yet have made it into *The New Yorker*—or into *CityBeat*. ■

Venturing into different communities is a vital part of what distinguishes theatergoing from sitting at home, watching TV.

