

DUMBBING DOWN?

By Sylvie Drake

IT WAS INEVITABLE that somebody would speak up.

Les Spindle's article, "Everyone's a Critic" (*Back Stage West* Issue of Oct 11-17, 2007), defended an unpopular position: that it takes a certain level of verve, intellect, knowledge and discipline to be a responsible and readable critic.

For those who have not read it, Spindle's well-reasoned piece pointed out that with all the blogging clogging cyberspace, the idea being floated—heck, being implemented—that it's OK for everyone to be a critic is fundamentally flawed.

The whole notion of the populist review may have started with *Zagat* and the idea such consumer guides promote that we can all

But doesn't that very need for a filter—an editor (censor?) who decides what's fit to print—negate the idea of an absolute cyberdemocracy? (Remember Michael Kinsley's disastrous attempt to turn *LA Times* editorials into wikitorials? There is a role for public forums. That wasn't one of them.)

The opposite view—mine, I confess—is that we are merely expanding a growing tolerance for mediocrity—professional and non—that is already prevalent in the global society. Venting an opinion is not the same as having a modulated response to a piece of creative work. The notion of opening up the critical field to everyone with a computer (and a credit card) was picked up long ago by merchants as a way to sell their wares. It's merchandising. So yes, there are commercial uses for this type of writing, but don't call it criticism because it hardly qualifies as thoughtful disquisition, and—crucially—shows very little respect for the artists involved. Of course we all have a choice to read or not read any review. But shouldn't we aspire to cultivate critics with an incisive, knowledgeable and compelling style and point of view? Critics we can respect?

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IT'S THE BEST PLAY
I'VE EVER SEEN”

comment quite competently on our latest expensive meal (or, by extension, play, film, concert or art show). Of course we can. Pick a number from one to ten. But that does not translate into a nuanced and thoughtful assessment of the chef's efforts or a measure of his achievement or whether the cuisine at the French Laundry is worth the sizzling price (to say nothing of evaluating a performance of Beethoven's Fifth or Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*).

Some of us don't see this as a problem. Sasha Anawalt, Director of the USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Program and the NEA Arts Journalism Institute in Theatre and Musical Theatre, vigorously defends the proliferation of anybody reviews: "The great, glorious thing about the Internet is the freedom, the ability to create a community on many levels that has porous, flexible walls and boundaries," she said for this article. "All people with access to a computer can have a say. What on earth is wrong with that? As long as the keepers of the site screen the reader's letters before they go up on the site and use common sense, the world and art should be safe."

What the populist review has done is not so much level the playing field as flatten it. It dulls the senses when it should stimulate them.

This process of degradation began some 20 years ago while I was still a theatre critic at the *Los Angeles Times*. Editors then began favoring an increase in advance pieces about the arts while whittling away at reviews, reducing their space or prominence, and eventually their number, even as the number of events (in all fields) kept rising. Advance pieces are safe. They provide context and information but stay clear of controversy. And the drift has only grown more so as newspapers have become less sure of their function and identity, and as technology overtook them at every turn.

Democracy doesn't quite work when you're looking to well-grounded folks for guidance, informed opinion and accurate information. Throwing open the critical floodgates to anyone with time on their hands, an ego and a yen to chat may result in the occasional interesting exchange. By and large, though, it's anything goes.

"What is the difference between what Steven Stanley is doing [website: lastagescene.com],

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which supports running mostly positive reactions] and what the entertainment reporter does on television for the nightly news,” posits Anawalt. “Does anyone ever question that the news entertainment guy is seriously a valid critic when he talks about how great *Wicked* is... ? We’ve gotten used to him. We pay him no never mind. And, so, I suspect those who become followers of Stanley’s site, if they want to eat nothing but the positive, will merrily do so and the rest will pay him no never mind.

“He is perfectly entitled to his website and his opinions and this is what the Web bestows upon us, and he will have his readers. He should. There is no reason to get upset about that. The world is vast.”

That is a generous, inclusive view. But the Stanley idea of only accentuating the positive is degrading. What are we? In kindergarten? The only reason to read a review is to be enlightened. It also should be the only reason to write one.

Let me be clear: I’m not defending all so-called professional critics vs. all ad-hoc ones. There’s good and bad in both places. The standards of professional criticism vary widely and tend mostly to hover around the shallows. It is not every day that a George Bernard Shaw or a

creative work in its own right. Above all, it must be approached responsibly because it directly impacts people’s lives. An artist deserves a smart, careful assessment of the work—good or bad—not some marketing-oriented thumbs up or down. The reader does too.

John Lahr, theatre critic for *The New Yorker* and scion of the great Bert Lahr (which had to give him a leg up when it comes to understanding performance) said the following in his keynote address at last year’s National Endowment Arts Institute at USC, a program for critics: “Our culture is a whispering gallery of opinion. A sort of indiscriminate and indiscriminating cultural gas has settled over the land, and certainly over theatrical discussion. A sort of cultural static. Braying and blurring and numbing. Turn on the radio, TV, now the blogosphere. Everyone, of course, has a right to speak their own opinion but not all opinions are informed. What we are talking about here tonight is both the nature and the quality of that judgmental eye. It seems to me that we’re at this very moment, through this sort of blur of the whispering gallery, at a place that [Alexander] Pope described in “*The Dunciad*,” where the den of opinion is kind of a universal right.

“ENTERTAINING”

Stark Young or a Harold Clurman comes along—and even they had their bad days. But they took the job seriously.

Criticism by definition is not a democratic occupation. Martin Bernheimer, former classical music critic for the *LA Times*, insisted correctly that all claims to *objective* criticism are inherently false. He was being paid, he said, to be *subjective* because his bosses must have determined his opinions were worth knowing.

Ultimately, the notion that anyone can write criticism is a myth. Not everyone is knowledgeable enough, writes English well enough, brings to it enough passion or does the necessary research.

A critique worth reading should be only the start of a stimulating debate and a piece of

*Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restor’d;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All.”*

Is it the collapse of standards or the rebirth of a wide-ranging meritocracy? Remains to be seen. What is certain amid all this uncertainty: there is no turning back the clock. ■

Sylvie Drake is a former theatre columnist and critic of the Los Angeles Times and currently an Artistic Advisor of The Denver Center Theatre Company and Director of Publications for The Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

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