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## The New Playgoer's Club: The Emergent Theater Weblog Culture and the Practice of Theater Criticism

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THE NEW PLAYGOER'S CLUB:  
THE EMERGENT THEATER WEBLOG CULTURE AND  
THE PRACTICE OF THEATER CRITICISM

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Television, Film, Radio and Theater

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Elizabeth Spreen

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THE NEW PLAYGOER'S CLUB:  
THE EMERGENT THEATER WEBLOG CULTURE  
THE PRACTICE OF THEATER CRITICISM

by

Elizabeth Spreen

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF TELEVISION, FILM, RADIO, AND  
THEATER

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## ABSTRACT

### THE NEW PLAYGOER'S CLUB: THE EMERGENT THEATER WEBLOG CULTURE AND THE PRACTICE OF THEATER CRITICISM

by Elizabeth Spreen

New York City has one of the most active and engaged theater blogging communities in the country. It is common practice for theater bloggers to supplement and comment on the journalistic and critical practices of the *New York Times*, *Time Out*, *New York*, and *The Village Voice*, but the idea of a theater blogosphere is still a relatively new phenomenon. The emerging role of blogger-critics and their critical practice is largely uncharted and far from understood. While sharing some of the same tasks as the journalist-critic, blogger-critics are still defining and identifying the scope of their practice and, in some cases, forging an identity that is separate from that of mainstream journalist-critics.

This study examines a series of events called Blogger's Nights and documents the factors that shaped the critical function of the reviews that resulted from these community events. Taking a case study approach, this study aims to establish a baseline of information about the practice of blogger-criticism and to identify how critical tasks are shaped by the boundaries of the medium and the expectations of the community that surrounds the blogger-critics.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Question.....	13
Terminology.....	17
Methodology.....	25
Bloggers Nights: Structure and Intention.....	26
Chapter 2: Presentation and Construction of the Blogger-Critic’s Identity.....	30
Analysis: Pig Farm.....	31
Analysis: The Internationalist.....	43
Analysis: Dying City.....	53
Chapter 3: Free Tickets and the Role of Blogger-Critics.....	57
Analysis: Dying City.....	58
Analysis: Essential Self-Defense.....	65
Chapter 4: Standards and Practices and the Expression of Critical Function.....	77
Analysis: 100 Saints You Should Know.....	78
Chapter 5: Conclusions.....	95
Areas for Future Research.....	111
Bibliography.....	114

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The use of weblogs or *blogs* as a medium for thinking and writing about theater provides a provocative context in which to examine how the function of theater criticism may be shaped by the medium for which it is written. Theater criticism became web-based in the late 1990s when major newspapers like the *New York Times* began offering expanded arts sections online that included reviews and comprehensive listings of theater, movies and other cultural events (Goldstein 124). When newspapers made this transition, it was assumed that critics would continue to serve the same gate-keeping function they had historically, determining the value of cultural products by enforcing critical standards while educating and informing the public about theater arts activity. This gate-keeping function is the core feature of the *New York Times* arts section and central to the value of the newspaper itself (Stein 113). While the critical force of the *Times* has not been supplanted, the *2005 New York Times Company Annual Stock-holders Report* identified non-traditional media as a risk factor in maintaining the “traditional media model in which quality journalism has been primarily supported by print advertising revenues” (12 2005). Indeed, competition from portal sites, such as Yahoo.com, that were able to generate a larger audience for listings led to a decrease in advertising dollars and eventually forced the *Times* to scale back its online arts coverage to present levels. It should come as no surprise that the *Times* Annual Stockholders Report from 2007 also notes that the newspaper industry as a whole has experienced an increase in “competition from new media formats and sources other than traditional newspapers (often free to



users)” along with a shift among “some consumers to receive all or a portion of their news other than from a newspaper” (10 2007).

The popularity of websites like nytheatre.com, offoffonline.com, Theater Scene.net, and TheaterMania.com, demonstrates a growing trend among audiences and theater artists to go outside mainstream media sources for information about theatrical activity (Goldstein 124). In 2008, Mark Denton’s nytheater.com claimed 3.4 million unique visitors (Jacobs 2009) and boasted a core readership of “several hundred thousand people who appreciate the fact his site reviews virtually every show in town — even those in small, out-of-the-way venues” (Jacobs 2009). Finally, the use of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook and online message boards and listservs indicates that theatergoers no longer rely upon “authoritative voices for either listings or reviews” (Goldstein 125). Blogs featuring theater criticism reflect this populist trend.

One of the earliest arts blogs to feature theater criticism is *About Last Night*, launched by Terry Teachout, theater critic for *The Washington Post*. *About Last Night* is one of several blogs that make up *ArtsJournal*, an online digest of arts and cultural journalism that has included blogs on the site since 2003. Teachout estimates that at the time he launched *About Last Night*, there were “fewer than a dozen” blogs dealing with arts or culture and “none written by a critic from the mainstream media” (“Culture”). Now, many mainstream critics maintain a blog including James Wolcott writing for *Esquire*, theater critics Lyn Gardiner and Michael Billington for guardian.co.uk. Additionally, critics maintaining personal blogs include *New Yorker* music critic, Alex Ross, whose blog is called *The Rest is Noise*, *Time Out*, *New York* theater editor, David

Cote who writes *Histriomastix*, and *Back Stage* editor Leonard Jacobs who writes *The Clyde Fitch Report*. By 2007, Teachout notes:

The number of serious and committed stagebloggers reached a critical mass (so to speak) this season, and I now spend at least as much time keeping up with what they write as I do reading the reviews of my print-media brethren. (“Culture”)

A diverse group of bloggers consisting of theater artists, university professors, audience members, and early career critics write most of the blogs to which Teachout refers (“Culture”). Many of the blogger-critics are writers in their twenties and thirties “who have yet to publish in the MSM or have only just begun to appear there” as a “direct result of the press coverage their blogs have received,” which Teachout notes is “a phenomenon that itself offers anecdotal evidence of the significance of this new medium” (“Culture”). Guardian critic Lyn Gardiner has credited theater bloggers with saving professional critics from extinction by “opening up criticism” and, although she does not think blogging “will supplant newspaper criticism,” she does feel that “these new voices will keep us on our toes. Suddenly theatre criticism has got a whole lot more interesting” (Gardiner). With space constraints removed, Gardiner feels that bloggers are “writing thoughtfully and inspiring a genuine dialogue about the issues that matter in theatre” (Gardiner).

The proliferation of theater blogs makes it impossible to articulate the practice of every blogger-critic. While keeping note of blogger-critics practicing internationally and in other metropolitan areas in the United States such as Los Angeles and Chicago, this study limits itself to looking at the critical practice of bloggers living and working in the New York City area. Bloggers outside of the New York City are cited but only in regard

to blog posts and reviews that members of the NYC group write. The study notes instances of crossover participation between communities, especially on more controversial issues that relate to the evolution of blogging and critical practice or the role of the blogger-critic.

Virtual communities form around shared interests, knowledge, and experiences rather than “geographic proximity or institutional affiliations” (Levy 108). However, for purposes of manageability, this study does identify a blogging community by geographical location. In this case, participants within the community can be other bloggers and/or readers who are located within the New York City area. They are brought together through their individual blogs because of shared interests and experiences creating theater in this particular location. The critical practice of this community is significant because of its proximity to professionally and independently produced theater in New York City and the way it positions itself in relationship to mainstream media outlets such as the *New York Times* and alternative weeklies like *Time Out, New York* and *The Village Voice*. Because New York is considered a hub of professional theater, visual arts, and publishing, practices in the city tend to be indicative of those adopted across the country.

The New York City theater-blogging community first gained recognition from mainstream media sources such as *The New York Observer* and *The Nation* in 2006 when a group of bloggers criticized the New York Theatre Workshop’s cancellation of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, a documentary play about a young woman killed by a bulldozer while acting as a human shield for Palestinians and their homes. In the months that

followed, bloggers reported on the events surrounding the controversy and wrote posts that questioned, NYTW Artistic Director, James Nicola's decision. Garret Eisler, a freelance writer who now blogs for the *Huffington Post* and reviews plays for the *Village Voice* and *Time Out, New York*, and George Hunka, a playwright (who freelanced as a critic for *The New York Times*), wrote extensively about Nicola's decision on their blogs. Hunka has since deleted those posts from his blog, thus making illustration of his role difficult to cite. Two other writers joined their efforts, playwright Jason Grote who writes *The Fortress of Jason Grote* published a petition on his blog asking the NYTW to reverse its decision, and playwright Christopher Shinn posted an essay on his MySpace page. Eisler praised Shinn for speaking out when "no one with a name was saying anything" (Weiss).

Eisler is of particular note due to the unrivaled depth of his analysis and coverage of the event. Since May 2005, Eisler has maintained *Playgoer*, a personal blog that functions as an ongoing theater column. He describes his blog as "a casual collection of Theatre Reviews, and other observations on the arts and issues pertaining to culture...but mostly theatre. Not a Broadway fanzine, not a Press Release clearinghouse" ("Welcome"). Between February 28, 2006 and May 2, 2006, Eisler wrote 200 posts, 150 of which featured some aspect of the unfolding *Rachel Corrie* story and eight of which were reviews of shows. He constructed a timeline so that he and his readers could fact check statements made by NYTW about the Royal Court Theatre and the play's producers, Alan Rickman and Kathryn Viner, about how the decision to produce and subsequently cancel the production evolved (Eisler "The Timeline"). He transcribed a

Brian Lehrer interview with John Patrick Shanley in which the playwright was critical of Nicola and NYTW (Eisler “Gangsterism”). He also recapped the previous week’s events and listed all news-related items that had been published (Eisler “Where the Story’s”). In addition to performing these basic journalistic tasks, he wrote posts urging theater artists, such as Tony Kushner, to speak out against the decision and successfully enlisted blogger, Andrew Sullivan of the *Daily Dish* to write about the story (Eisler “Gangsterism”). The results of Eisler’s efforts were twofold. He increased public awareness about Nicola’s decision by keeping the story alive and giving his community a forum in which to discuss its outrage over the details of the decision.

Theater weblogs are a form of social media that allows a diverse theater arts community to talk about the issues it confronts as artists and to promote its artistic work. Up to this time, it had been regular practice for bloggers to interrogate journalistic and critical practices of the local newspapers and newsmagazines as well as critique the privileging of Broadway theatre production over the plays produced both Off-Broadway and Off-Off Broadway. Outside of New York City, however, the idea of a theater blogosphere was a relatively new phenomenon. The *Rachel Corrie* controversy represents one of the first times that a critic-blogger took an active role in reporting a story to such an extent that it was picked up by larger mainstream media sources both online and in print. Within the theater blogosphere, the controversy became a springboard for discussion about bloggers’ involvement in reporting the story and the quality of discourse it generated. Don Hall, a blogger who publishes *Angry White Guy in Chicago*, argued that while he recognized the importance of the Corrie affair, he felt there

was an essential disagreement throughout the blogosphere as to “why it [the Rachel Corrie controversy] is important” (Playgoer “The C word”). Scott Walters, a blogger and university professor based in Ashland, NC, who maintains a blog entitled *Theatre Ideas*, urged bloggers to “think in a more complex manner” (Playgoer “Gangsterism”) and challenged the notion that Nicola’s action was a form of censorship. Playwright, Matthew Freeman suggested on his blog, *Theatre and Politics*, that the blogosphere had “latched onto and exploited” the situation and expressed discomfort with the tone of the discussion (“Saga of Rachel”). Freeman acknowledged that the *My Name is Rachel Corrie* affair was “a litmus test for the theatrical blogosphere’s effectiveness” but cautioned that it could “either be a self-righteous echo chamber or a healthy dose of reality, an alternative to “gotcha” politics” (“Saga of Rachel”). Clive Davis, a critic for *The Times* of London, praised Eisler’s efforts:

Unlike *The Playgoer*, I thought the piece was an utterly conventional slab of agitprop. But there is an important principle at stake in allowing it to be staged in Manhattan without fear of upsetting political groups. *The Playgoer* showed more interest in that question than did many establishment journalists. Bloggers may be mildly obsessive, but the fact that some New York producers now offer them free seats to new shows is a sign of the role that they can play in helping a production to find its audience. (Davis 2006)

New York City continues to have one of the most active and engaged theater-blogging communities in the country. Keeping a weblog has become standard practice among independent theater artists – playwrights, directors, performers, and designers working in Off-Off Broadway venues. As playwright, Johnna Adams, who publishes a blog called *blindsquirrel* notes, “the web really defines the NYC theater culture” as opposed to Los Angeles where “the theater scene is still categorized and shaped almost

entirely by print media” (Adams qtd. in NYTR 2008). New York theater bloggers act as a third information source, supplementing the arts coverage of *The New York Times* and alternative weeklies like *Time Out New York* and *The Village Voice*, which aim to cover theater activity in Off-off Broadway venues, but are limited by space constraints. Given that Off-off Broadway shows are six times less likely to be reviewed than Off-Broadway (Wonderful Town 80) productions, review-oriented blogs provide much needed support for Off-Off Broadway shows that are not covered by the local media (Riccio “0326070”). Adams credits blogs and review-based websites for helping to publicize “all the fabulous low-budget shows that are ignored by the print press” (Adams qtd. in NYTR 2008).

At the time of this study, the role of blogger-critics and the function of their criticism were only beginning to be explored and negotiated within the community. As a result of the MNiRC controversy, theater bloggers were getting attention by producers who were looking to capitalize on the new media as a way of reaching younger audiences and by the mainstream press, locally and abroad, which was attempting to report on the phenomenon and understand the implications of the theater blogosphere’s presence. Perhaps the most illustrative of how this process occurred is a series of events called Blogger’s Nights that took place between July 2006 and August 2007. Hoping to “democratize the process of opinion-making in theater,” (“This Week”) Isaac Butler organized the first Blogger’s Night in July of 2006. Butler’s purpose was to “create an alternate constituency [sic] to subscribers and mainstream critics” on the order of “Netroots organizing and fundraising, only instead of progressive politics, we focus on edgier, more creative theater” (“Happy Internationalist”).

The event was inspired by *Times*' journalist-critic Charles Isherwood's review of *Pig Farm*, a play by Greg Kotis produced by Roundabout Theater Company. Butler had seen the show previously and posted his initial response, noting that he disagreed with Isherwood's review. He acknowledged that he had "a chip on my shoulder vis-a-vis Charles Isherwood," but promised to forego what he referred to as his typical "ritual where I connect what I disagree with in Isherwood's review to everything wrong" ("But Of Course"). Butler observed that Kotis's play was "worth seeing and making your own judgement [sic] on, noting that, "Greg Kotis has a unique comedic sensibility [sic] and technique that you should find out more about" ("But Of Course").

Butler's issue with the *Times* had nothing to do with the paper's arts coverage or with whether "their reviewers are bad or whatever," rather it was that "they have quite a bit of power and there's no real alternative to what they're doing" ("Some Short Points"). In the case of *Pig Farm*, Butler recognized that it was important to "get the word out about the show" to an audience for whom the play was better suited – "namely people with an indie-theater sensibility" ("This Week"). Thus, Butler approached the management of Roundabout Theater and arranged the event. Butler laid out his expectations for the evening emphasizing that the event was not an attempt to "stuff the ballot box," that bloggers who participated should respond to the show honestly, offering negative or positive opinion. Butler explains:

bloggers who didn't like the show should absolutely write about not liking it. And bloggers who want to respond to the show rather than straight-up review it should feel free to as well. My issue is, simply, that one paper has way too much power in this town. ("This Week")



The critical power of the *New York Times* has become monolithic for three reasons - the authority and scope of its arts criticism (Tyndall 32), the unparalleled depth and quantity of its arts coverage (Stein 113), and the shortage of competitive newspapers due to consolidation and closure. Taking into account the industry shift favoring entertainment reporting over criticism, the paper still devotes more of its arts pages to criticism and theater than any newspaper in the country (Stein 113). In *Wonderful Town* a follow up to its 1999 study, the National Arts Journalism Program notes an increase in *Times* articles devoted to theater in the five-year period from October 1998 to October 2003, while the paper maintained its 1998 level of cultural criticism – publishing 400 reviews in October of 2003 – on par with the study’s previous findings (Stein 113). Scott Heekin-Canedy, President and General Manager of the *Times*, considers cultural coverage integral to the *Times* “reader franchise” and the core of the paper’s “financial health and viability” (Stein 112). *The Times* is the “only paper newspaper to devote more space to the performing arts than to movies” (Stein 113) and it “continues to generate significant profits” (Stein 114). For Heekin-Canedy, covering the arts is win-win situation that “represents both good business and good journalism” (qtd. in Stein 113).

The *Times* arts criticism has been the “strongest element at the paper for generations” (Landman qtd. in Stein 113). Butler wonders if “audience’s [sic] realize how much their opinion of something is shaped before they even go into the theater” and suggests more specifically, that the *Times* power to “impact the audience’s (especially a subscription audience’s) reaction” to a show “should not be underestimated” (“Happy Pig”). As one of three national papers, the *Times* exerts considerable influence over

straight dramatic plays, both on Broadway and Off-Broadway, which depend primarily upon reviews for advertising (Wonderful Town 74). A study conducted by Reddy, Swaminathan, and Motley demonstrates the extent to which audience information sources such as advertising, previews, and critic reviews affect the success of a Broadway production. The researchers took a random sampling of reviews from shows opening during the 1980-81 and 1981-1982 Broadway seasons as well as an additional random sampling of shows from the 1991-94 season, a period of time that covers all of Frank Rich's term at the newspaper. Findings indicate that not only did reviews have a significant impact in terms of predicting and influencing the success of Broadway shows, but that the *Times* critic's reviews yielded nearly twice as much influence as those critics from the *Daily News* or the *New York Daily* (Reddy, Swaminathan, and Motley 370). The National Arts Journalism Program's study supports this finding qualitatively, noting that most theater professionals view the influence of both the *Post* and *The Daily News* as slight "in terms of critical standing and audience-building," the value of positive reviews published in those papers being that they can be reprinted "in an advertisement in the *Times*" (Gersten qtd. in Wonderful Town 72).

Thus, *Times* chief critic Ben Brantley and Charles Isherwood are positioned as the central gatekeepers of New York City theater, which in turn affects the production of work in theaters across the country as well as abroad (Booth 192 – 193). As Reddy, Swaminathan, and Motley indicate, the *New York Times* critic's influence on the success of a Broadway show is almost twice that of either *The New York Post* or *Daily News* (378). Based on attendance and box office yields, the study demonstrates a pattern of

Broadway success associated with positive reviews in the *Times* (378). Furthermore, a good review in the *Times* is an influential publicity tool – building audiences for a production, but also generating publicity within the newspaper that results in *Times* feature articles and interviews for those associated with the production (Booth 192). Conversely, a negative review reveals the capacity of the *Times* to “erase every trace of the work from its pages” (Booth 192). According to Goldman, “the power of the *Times* is that it can kill a serious drama” (83).

The *Times* arts section operates according to standard industry practices, but the “choice of which shows get reviewed is necessarily subjective” (Wonderful Town). Chief critic, Ben Brantley has first choice shows to review, then Christopher Isherwood chooses from those remaining, and anything else goes to second-stringers and/or freelance critics. Which shows are included on the list is another area where the *Times* exercises a good deal of power and feeds the perception that if a production isn’t mentioned in the *Times* “it doesn’t really happen” (Gersten qtd. in Wonderful Town). Recognizing the monolithic potential of the *Times*, Eisler writes:

*The Times* is not evil. But there are bad consequences to it [the *Times*] reigning for so long as the only and, hence, authoritative, source in covering the NYC (hence, alas, American) theatre scene. The *Voice* and *Time Out* have certainly been providing more varied and often higher quality coverage. But they’re only once a week. So one good contribution blogs have been able to make is offering some daily alternative to the *Times*. Note I say “alternative” not substitute. I could also say complement. I myself continue to read the *Times Arts* page slavishly. (“Panel Follow Up”)

Eisler suggests that the primacy of *The Times* is one of perception, one that will change if “PR firms and readers make the active choice to look” (“Panel Follow Up”) for

alternatives; Blogger's Nights were the New York City blogosphere's first attempt to provide such an alternative.

### *Statement of the Question*

Blogger's Nights are one experiment in defining the role of blogger-critics within a specific community. This study aims to document the factors that shaped the critical function of reviews that resulted from these community blogging events. Blogs represent a new medium for writing about theater, yet no scholarly studies have been conducted in this area and thus, the defining aspects of this emergent practice remain largely uncharted. Arts journalists have written extensively about the role of theater bloggers and the impact of blog-criticism, but much of what has been written is speculative and often assumes that blogging is either an extension of journalistic practices or a devaluation of the critical process. As playwright Jason Grote notes, there is a tendency for people to assume that online publishing is "just going to replace the MSM" or to claim that blogging is "irrelevant, when neither is really true" ("The Blogger Review"). Grote emphasizes that although "the Internet is indeed changing media, blogging is a fundamentally different enterprise, one that we don't really have a name for" ("The Blogger Review").

In August 2006, David Cote, editor of *Time Out New York*, launched his personal blog, *Histriomastix*. In his opening blog post, Cote acknowledges that the "blogs, to which I've linked and which may link to me, have been a major inspiration" ("About Time") and states that he has been engaged by "the high level of conversation" as well as "the enthusiasm and the rapidity with which some bloggers have been able to respond to

news issues and aesthetic debates,” especially with regard to the “crisis of artistic leadership and political relevance which the Rachel Corrie/NYTW disaster opened up” (“About Time”). Cote also cites theater bloggers as having been the influence for the style and tone his *TONY* review of *Rabbit Hole* which mixed “standard reviewing practice with rancorous editorializing” to criticize the company and the play for “promulgating safe, bourgeois plays” (“About Time”). Cote appears to align with bloggers by taking issue with New York’s mainstream media critics. He writes:

When critics at the city’s leading media outlets either get the facts dead wrong, express outdated, middlebrow tastes, fawn over celebrities, remain ignorant of rising talent downtown, fail to support daring young playwrights and companies, or make it painfully clear that they have never actually worked in the field, then it’s time to turn to blogs for informed opinion and passion. (“About Time”)

Blog-criticism is not fully understood as a practice that can be separate from journalistic-criticism; it has yet to develop into its own distinct genre, thus assumptions are made as to style and content that may not define the practice as a whole. As is the nature of blogging, blog-criticism at this time consists of a diverse series of practices that are still being negotiated and explored. Because blogger-criticism shares many of the same tasks as journalistic-criticism, it is necessary to fully identify the areas of overlap and to understand the purpose of tasks within the context of the medium for which they are performed. Successive chapters will explore the status of blog criticism with respect to presentation and authority, the ethical implications of accepting free tickets, how standards and practices determine critical function, and how blogging may offer new ways of conveying the experience of performance.

A study of blog-criticism is particularly useful at this time because of the changing dynamic of arts reporting and criticism in both the mainstream media and the new media environment of the World Wide Web. Professional critics such as Brustein, Bentley and Kauffmann perceive this shift as a loss of a recognizable audience and the disappearance of a critical culture, while Kalb, who is half their age, attributes the change to the fact that there appears to be “no social capital to be had in either knowing about the current theatre” or in “writing about the current theatre, as there was a generation ago” (“Critic as Thinker”). Kalb explains:

I think the world is kind of mixing it up right now, and trying to figure out what the place for judgment and discrimination is in this new mediated, wired, info-age world. We all, I think, have spent time being depressed about this “everyone’s a critic” ethos on the Internet. And everyone *is* a critic. But on the other hand, there’s a couple of really good bloggers out there. So why take aim at all blogging? (“Critic as Thinker”)

Hickey suggests that such shifts in value are to be expected, noting that in “a poorly regulated, cosmopolitan society like our own, the discourse surrounding cultural objects is at once freely contingent and counter-entropic” (170). In Hickey’s view, cultural discourse is a dynamic process that “neither hardens into dogma nor decays into chaos as it disperses” rather it “creates new images and makes new images out of old ones, with new constituencies around them. It is a discourse of experiential consequences, not disembodied causes” (170).

Nick Fracaro, dramaturge, director and one of the founders of the Rat Conference, sees critical writing on blogs as an opportunity for artists to “remain outside the market of K-Mart shoppers looking for their dollar vaue [sic]” (“Friday Roundup”). From this perspective, blogging has the potential to create an interstitial space around artists and

their work so that it can be discussed from a critical perspective that resists definition and the imposition of mainstream standards and practices. RL Lewis notes that independent publications such as the –zine *Off: A Journal for Alternative Theater and Other Stages* that covered the downtown theater scene in the mid 1990’s played a “vital role in our community theater, and cultivated some of our better current critics” (“Some Thoughts”) including David Cote who founded and edited *Off*. Blogs have the potential to take the place of those “theater-specific [sic] small publications” that Lewis credits with supporting “a wing of our community that is growing nowhere today, but online” (“Some Thoughts”). Lewis explains:

We’re all fortunate to have nytheatre.com (though we know their critics should be tougher on us), but there needs to be much more. The only other hope that I see are the bloggers. The talent is here, if not the attention-span. I wonder if a team of bloggers couldn’t rule our community faster and easier than a nation-wide play production (though I know neither are easy). I’m just saying ...[sic]... don’t we have the tools and talent to begin solving this important issue ourselves? (“Some Thoughts”)

By fostering discussion of larger issues affecting the art form and its practice, Croggan notes that blogs reflect “something of the dynamic flux and temporality of theatre” (“Dying City”).

The fact that anyone who has the means and the desire can self-publish through a variety of social media has had a democratizing effect on the critical act itself – now everyone truly is a critic. The popularity of social networking and the interactive nature of the blogosphere may signify a generational shift in the value, reception and the communication of theatrical experiences and critical response to them, thus indicating a need to expand or renegotiate the function of criticism. Since there has been no in-depth

analysis of the theater blogosphere and how this emerging weblog culture might impact the practice of theater criticism, this study may be helpful in establishing a baseline of information about this relatively new practice. It is also an important step towards understanding how the role of the theater critic is shaped by the medium for which he or she writes, and may suggest strategies for the expanded development and use of contemporary criticism.

### *Terminology*

The first term that must be defined is *critical function*. Typically, such definitions focus on criticism's *raison* or role (Gillon 1633) and there is no shortage of propositions describing and, in some cases, prescribing the various endpoints of the critical act. However aspirational and instructional such directives may be, they do not offer an unequivocal definition (Smallwood 253) of critical function. It is useful, therefore, to consider the phrase in its constituent parts as a means of determining some of its operational elements and describing its context within cultural discourse.

*Critical* is most often defined as the act of expressing “adverse or disapproving comments or judgments” and analyzing the “merits and faults of a work of literature or art” (Concise Oxford English Dictionary). The work of the critic is evaluative (Gillon 1633) and might include the “investigation of the text, character, composition and origin of literary documents,” or the act of “estimating those qualities and character of literary or artistic works” (OED). There is a corrective component implicit in the critical act that asserts both an authority to judge and a recognized set of standards for achievement.

Richards elaborates:



Criticism promulgates standards and it provokes the artist to achieve those standards. It urges artists to do their most accomplished work. It supports their most daring explorations and understands their breaking new ground and appreciates their smallest efforts. The arts are a dangerous place to be. (qtd. in Booth xvi)

*Function* derives from the Latin *functio*, meaning to perform or to execute, thus it can mean the “mode of action or activity by which a thing fulfills its purpose” (The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English) or the “use to which language can be directed” (Soanes and Stevenson). Language in this case is used in the process of the “commentation and exposition of works of art” (Eliot 69 1975). One of the more compelling features of the critical act is its inherent discursiveness (Eliot 69 1975; Barthes 32; Marranca 9). It is through the process of writing that criticism achieves its function.

Criticism finds its roots in the Greek word “crit,” meaning to sift, and *krinein* (κρίνω), to separate. Kerr explains that the “true identity of the critic is that of analyst and interpreter” whose “function is to reduce to rational terms an experience that has taken place in intuitive terms – to state objectively what has happened subjectively” (Kerr 39 1958). There is a speculative quality to the critical act that involves sifting through the immediate experience of live performance and choosing which of the affects to salvage as pertinences (Kauffmann 9 -10 1983). Thus the critical act is a self-conscious procedure, on the order of an autopsy, that involves interrogating a work of art after the fact and using written language to account for the experience (Hickey 167). Harold Clurman felt the critic should try to define the nature of what he or she examines with as much exactitude as possible (9 1974). The critic aims to reveal the work of art, the object

itself, however that process is confounded by the subjective experience of the critic. Hogan explains that “judgment is aimed at the object itself,” yet observes that “our responsive basis for the judgment is in the intentional object, which is to say our construal or understanding of the real object” (Hogan).

A certain amount of distortion exists between what is experienced and how that experience is described, the actual object inevitably lost, dissolved into the act of translation. Susan Sontag feels that in the United States this distortion is further compounded by the noise generated by the culture itself. She writes:

Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life – its material plenitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties. And it is in light of the condition of our senses, our capacities (rather than those of another age), that the task of the critic must be assessed. (13 – 14)

Believing that the “aim of all commentary on art should be to make works of art – and, by analogy our own experience – more rather than less, real to us” (14), Sontag determines that the “function of criticism should be to show how it [the work of art] is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means” (14). In doing so, she argues for a transparency in critical practice that reveals the underpinnings of critical commentary itself. It is not the aim of this study to prescribe a definitive purpose for the critical act rather; the concern is directed at examining the means by which critical tasks are accomplished within a particular medium, in this case through journalism and blogging, in order to reveal how those practices shape critical function. Therefore operative definitions of the phrase will continue to be explored as a way of illustrating the dynamic nature of critical discourse.

Criticism is considered a professional pursuit performed by either a *critic* or a *reviewer*. Though these terms are used interchangeably, there are practitioners and theorists who make distinctions between the two. Identifying and establishing such differences can have as much to do with delineating and preserving professional territory as it does with identifying the criteria by which such distinctions may be made.

Examining the various contexts in which the two words operate is instructive, revealing the perceptions and associations that can ultimately define and inform critical function.

A *critic* is typically referred to as someone who writes for publication in scholarly journals or books. Because a critic is not held to daily deadlines, it is presumed that he or she will offer a more penetrating and analytic view of a dramatic work. Clurman feels the work of the critic is rooted in dramatic criticism and his or her purpose is to evaluate performance with a view towards its formal characteristics (5 1974; Palmer 1; English 17-18). Kauffman concludes that the work of the critic is concerned with the text and its “pertinent history” (9 1973). A *reviewer* writes for a newspaper and attempts to engage with and write about the text in performance, to report what it is he or she sees; the purview of the *reviewer* is theater criticism (Kauffmann 9 1973; Clurman 5 1974). Brustein distinguishes between a *reviewer* and a *critic* by identifying an end use for the critical response. He regards the reviewer’s work as a medium for publicity and the critic’s work as a medium of thought (Brustein 4 1980). However, any published critique can serve a commercial aspect regardless of the critic’s intention.

Brooks Atkinson saw the difference as one of proximity, referring to himself as a reviewer whose intention for attending a performance was to write news for people

interested in theater. It was necessary to maintain a professional distance from the art and artists involved because his work was positioned within the context of a newspaper. The critic's relationship was more permeable (Shrum 45) and involved reading scripts, attending performances, and writing a review that was more "profound, judicial, and long term" (Greenberger qtd. in Shrum 45).

Distinctions between the words critic and reviewer revolve largely around the writer's treatment of the performance event (Shrum 45) within the context of the review. The writer's response will be affected by factors such as primary occupation, the deadlines involved for publication, the audience's familiarity with the material, and whether the review focuses on one artist or many (Shrum 45). The medium for which the critic writes also imposes organizational and technical limitations that affect the presentation and the substantive content of the critical review (Feral 312). Equally important in determining critical function are the standards and practices associated with the medium for which the review is written.

While critics vary greatly with respect to what constitutes such an evaluation, simply stated, a review is a "sequence of published statements" (Shrum Appendix A: Review Genres) about a performance. Typically a review by a journalist-critic concentrates on one specific theatrical event and is published concurrently with the run of the event (Shrum Appendix A: Review Genres). The review is written on deadline often completed within hours of having seen the performance (English 17). There is an expectation that the journalist-critic's response will be "informed, analytical, and documented," advising the spectator, illuminating the work, placing "the text in its

literary context,” and mentioning “the direction, the acting, and the scenography” (Feral 311). Shrum points out that the “evaluative content of nearly all reviews” (45) refutes the notion that writing for a newspaper restricts the journalist-critic to “descriptive reporting, generalized analysis and interpretation of the theatrical event” (English 17-18).

However, Acocella acknowledges that the demands of daily newspaper reviewing with its deadlines and word count “impose boundaries on how ambitious a reviewer can be” (Acocella).

Ultimately, whether critic or reviewer, the writer is positioned as a mediator who facilitates “the relationship between art and its audience” (Shrum Appendix A). This study is concerned with understanding the dynamics of the medium in which such mediation takes place. For the sake of clarity then, the words *journalist-critic* and *blogger-critic* are used to identify the writer with the medium in which he or she works. Any further distinctions between these words will have more to do with arriving at a set of boundaries imposed by the medium and the practices established within it. When directly quoting references, this study respects the word choice of the source.

The next term that must be clarified is the word *weblog* or *blog*. The first blogs were indexes of content that appeared in reverse chronological order and included pre-surfed or filtered Internet links (Gibson qtd. in Rosenberg) with commentary contextualizing those links (Miller and Shepherd). These structural characteristics gave blogs a look and feel that was distinctly different from personal webpages. The popularity of blogging has been driven by publishing tools such as Blogger and Wordpress that enable anyone to publish a blog regardless of his or her level of technical

expertise (Blood). These tools, in turn, have expanded the definitions of practice to include larger degrees and styles of commentary, however, blogs continue to be identified by chronological posts that may include hypertext links referencing primary sources and stories related to the subject of the blogger's post.

While a blog is structurally identifiable, the term is by no means self-descriptive. Blogs vary in style and content; subject matter can include everything from running commentary on current events to maintaining personal journals. For the purposes of this study, a *blog* will be defined as the online publishing medium that allows blogger-critics to write, publish and immediately distribute reviews to a global audience. Critical writing published in this format will appear in reverse chronological order, and may or may not include hypertext links. Blogger-critics publish digital content or expression in the form of criticism with the assumed "intention of sharing it asynchronously with a conceptualized audience" (Boyd).

*Blogg*ing as an activity encompasses "a diverse set of practices that take place on top of a medium that is called a blog" (Boyd), but which are largely defined by the blogger. Understanding the structural components of the blog provides insight into how it shapes practices that take place within its framework. Much like a newspaper, a blog is a way of organizing information, but with key conceptual differences that set it apart from print media. First, blogs eliminate delays in publishing; a blogger can write a review and instantly distribute it across the web. Writing on a blog is not limited by page-size constraints; a critic can thoroughly explore an idea without regard to space or editorial pressure, a rare privilege in today's newspaper industry where editors have a

“preoccupation with ad-to-text ratios” (Kalb 167 1993). A blog erases the idea of pages altogether in favor of short units of commentary called *posts* (Hourihan) which can consist of one word, a few sentences, or an essay. Regardless of length, every post will contain a date header that identifies the information as current, a time stamp that allows the reader to see the exact time the post was published, and a *permalink*. A permalink gives each post a unique url (uniform resource locator) that enables precise referencing of information. Permalinks add vibrancy to the medium by allowing bloggers to communicate across blogs. This feature also allows linking on a Facebook page, or Twitter stream, thus extending conversations across several social-networking platforms at once.

Many bloggers consider interactivity a fundamental aspect of blogging. It is certainly its most democratizing in that it allows for direct connection between the author, artist, and audience. The idea of blogging as a “loosely distributed conversation” (Hourihan) suggests that the practice occupies a rhetorical space “somewhere on the spectrum between speech and writing” (Bergman and Haythornthwaite 118). This conversational field (Rosen) is made visible through the structure of the blog; features such as permalinks, *blog rolls* (a list of blogs read by a particular blog’s author), *trackbacks*, and the inclusion of comments within posts allow readers to interact with the blogger and with each other in real time. Trackbacks are essentially notifications embedded in a post that alert the blogger to any blogs linking to a particular post. These features create a sense of immediacy, allow for a wider distribution of content, and facilitate discussion by visually extending conversations across blogs. The collaborative

structure of the blog allows participants to discuss plays, performance, and criticism itself as an open text rather than a closed commodity.

### *Methodology*

This study examines the development of critical function in the New York City theater blogosphere by looking at a series of events called Blogger's Nights. At the beginning of the study, an initial set of blogs was isolated first by using a Google search for the terms "theater criticism" and "New York City." This search yielded three blogs – *Superfluties* written by George Hunka, a playwright, blogger-critic and, at the time, a freelance critic for the New York Times; *The Playgoer*, by Garret Eisler, a blogger-critic and freelance critic for the *Village Voice*; and *Parabasis* by Isaac Butler, an independent theater director. Hunka deleted large portions of his blog from that time, making it difficult to cite his involvement in the community. However, his responses in the comment sections of other writer's blogs provide some record of his participation in the discussions surrounding the specific case studies mentioned here. Filtering through blog rolls on this initial set of blogs offered a larger selection of blogs to observe. Bloggers were selected using the following criteria:

1. Blogs were current, featuring substantive content updated one to three times per week. Most were updated more frequently.
2. Blogs featured theater criticism even if it wasn't the primary focus of the blog.
3. Blogs were established, in existence for a year or more.
4. All blogs were written in English and authored by bloggers residing in the New York City area.

Thus an initial group of study was isolated. This group consisted of the following:

- Isaac Butler, *Parabasis*
- Matthew Freeman, *On Theatre And Politics*



- Garrett Eisler, *The Playgoer*
- Jason Grote, *The Fortress of Jason Grote*
- Nick Fracaro, *Rat Sass*
- George Hunka, *Superfluities*
- Aaron Riccio, *That Sounds Kul, Metadrama*
- *Show Showdown* (a group blog featuring criticism written by David Bell, Christopher, Patrick Lee, and Aaron Riccio).
- *New Theatre Corps* (a group blog featuring criticism)
- Matt Johnson, *The Conversation and Political Frustration* (this blog has since become viewable by invitation only)
- Mark Armstrong, Mr. Excitement News (this blog has since become viewable by invitation only)
- Steve Loucks, *Steve On Broadway*

Reviews were noted, as were posts and discussions relevant to the practice of criticism and the blogger-critic's role. During this time, the Rachel Corrie controversy unfolded, offering the first significant event for study. The Blogger's Nights events were launched in the wake of the Corrie affair and presented a unique opportunity to observe how critical practice was shaped and developed in the context of a singular community project. While each blogger-critic evaluates plays according to his or her own set of criteria, Blogger's Nights united bloggers in the New York City theater community under a common purpose – that of forming a viable constituency to advocate for independent, Off-off Broadway theater.

### *Bloggers Nights: Structure and Intention*

Butler and Armstrong arranged three separate events, for *Pig Farm* at the Roundabout in July 2006, *The Internationalist* at The Vineyard Theater in November 2007, and *Dying City* at Lincoln Center in March 2007. Butler organized the first event by contacting the management of Roundabout Theater. Bloggers were provided complimentary tickets and were asked to write about the show on their blogs. The

intention was for bloggers to attend the performance as a group and to post their individual responses on deadline. Bloggers who participated were under no obligation to write favorably about the show. The only requirement was to write a post on deadline structured as either a formal review or – if a blogger did not feel comfortable writing a review – a personal response. While some of the bloggers who participated in the events were blogger-critics, others were playwrights, dramaturges, directors, lighting designers, and other Off-Off Broadway theater artists who supported Butler’s idea of trying to mobilize a younger audience for productions of new work playing in Off-Broadway venues. In some cases, the bloggers were provided discount codes by the theaters, which they posted in their reviews along with information about the venue and how to purchase tickets. Some bloggers opted not to publish codes, but gave no reason for that decision.

Contrasting the events organized by Armstrong and Butler are two Blogger’s Nights arranged by the theater public relations department of Playwrights Horizons for *Essential Self-Defense* and for extended previews of *100 Saints You Should Know*. Bloggers were contacted via email and offered complementary tickets in exchange for writing about the shows. No specific night was designated a Blogger’s Night performance and bloggers did not attend as a group. Each blogger was left to his or her own discretion as to how to structure a response and when to post. Observing the conversations that resulted from these two events highlights the ethical issues bloggers confronted by accepting free tickets and how these reviews were viewed by journalist-critics and editors, as well as the blogging community.

No direct interviews were conducted with blogger-critics or any blogger cited in this study because it was important to observe the writer and reader's unmediated responses; awareness of the inquiry might have influenced the direction of the discourse and compromised the findings. Nor were any of the participating theaters contacted. All research in relation to the Blogger's Nights events is based on direct observation of the blogs. The period of observation ran from February 2006 through September 2009.

In order for this inquiry to be significantly rigorous, it is necessary to devise a method of analysis that accounts for the differences between journalistic-criticism and blog-criticism while holding blog reviews to a recognized structure and industry standard with regard to content and purpose. Thus, the content of individual reviews in each case study will be analyzed according to the following considerations:

- Presentation of the blogger-critic with regard to subjectivity and point of view
- Writing style and format
- Treatment of the work being evaluated
- Breadth of knowledge
- Function of the review and how it fulfills the stated purpose of Blogger's Nights

Christgau notes that because journalist-critics and newspaper editors did not recognize rock criticism as a legitimate genre, its early development was not defined by traditional newspaper standards; it was able to experiment freely with form and structure (140 - 142). Thus, historical analysis of the development of rock and pop music criticism provides a useful comparison to illustrate how new genres of criticism can be situated within the overall practice of criticism. Of particular interest is looking at how rock and

pop music critics defined a purpose for their criticism and established a set of criteria that determined what constituted competency within their genre.

## **Chapter 2: Presentation and Construction of the Blogger-Critic's Identity**

The act of criticism is highly subjective; there are no normative criteria, no immutable set of technical or aesthetic laws that govern the way a theater critic writes about theater. One way a critic can distinguish his or her work is by identifying a guiding principal or philosophy that scaffolds their writing and reflects the way he or she sees or perceives a work of art. Those principals or philosophical underpinnings form the basis of what a critic feels is the function of his or her criticism (Booth 159). Although the journalist-critic's work may be informed by personal critical imperatives, it is also shaped by the editorial focus of the newspaper for which he or she works. The journalist-critic's relies on his or her editor to provide a consistent forum where the journalist-critic can "interact with the art form" and develop "a continuity of style, of personality, of sensibility" (Kroll). The Arts Editor and the publisher define the nature and scope of the journalist-critic's activity through the allocation of resources and opportunities they provide the critic to do his or her work. With neither an institutional or an outside editorial structure, the blogger-critic constructs his or her identity (Mortensen and Walker 260) and shapes the editorial focus of each review as well as the blog as a whole. The following case studies serve as examples of this process.

The reviews reveal varying degrees of subjectivity, ranging from the objective commentary of the journalist-critic to individual revelations based on the blogger's perspective or experiences as an artist. In analyzing the content of the review, it is important to focus on how each blogger frames his or her identity within the context of

the review and in what ways that may affect the reader's perception of the blogger's authority.

*Analysis: Pig Farm*

The group of bloggers was comprised of the following individuals: Isaac Butler, *Parabasis*, director; Ian Hill, *Collision Works*, director; Dan Trujillo, *Venal Scene*, playwright; Joshua James, *Daily Dojo*, playwright; James Comtois, *Jamespeak*, playwright; Matt Freeman, *On Theatre and Politics*, playwright; Garret Eisler, *The Playgoer*, freelance critic for *The Village Voice*; and Eric Miles Glover, *New Theater Corps*, blogger-critic. Mark Armstrong, *Mr. Excitement News* was also part of the Blogger's Night group but his blog is now accessible by invitation only, thus it was not possible to include his response or the comments that resulted from his review.

The bloggers linked to the reviews written by others in the group. This established a network for discussion and visually created a connection for the overall purpose of the event. Five of the bloggers stated they had received complimentary tickets for the performance. Eric Miles Glover, *New Theatre Corps*, and Garrett Eisler, *The Playgoer*, who both self-identify as critics, did not. Six bloggers included a discount code in their review that had been provided by the Roundabout.

In discussing the Roundabout's production of *Pig Farm*, the main focus of the bloggers' reviews is the work and they offer constructive criticism, judging the play by what it sets out to do and how it realizes that goal (Goethe). The bloggers demonstrate a familiarity with the genre of family farm plays and an awareness of how Kotis's play either fits within that framework or sets itself against it.

Eric Miles Glover's review is published on *New Theatre Corps*, a group blog sponsored by the Public Television program, *Theater Talk*, and launched in January of 2005. Produced by Susan Haskins with Mark Reidel serving as managing editor and Aaron Riccio as editor, the blog gives young critics (aged 26 and under) a forum in which to hone their craft. *New Theatre Corps* expects writers to have a background in theater and a working knowledge of the New York theater scene. The collective reviews a wide-range of theater "from PS 122 to HERE to 3LD to Soho Rep to Ohio Theater to Theater Row to New World Stages to Broadway" (New Theater Corps) in hope of drawing audiences, especially younger audiences, back to the theater. The group's output increased steadily with roughly 20 reviews published each month since January of 2007. The fact that Glover's review was published within the framework of a professionally oriented theater blog lends a perceived authority to his evaluation and imposes a journalistically derived structure on his presentation as a critic. From this objective distance, Glover situates his review so that judgment is rendered only on considerations of the play in performance.

Glover writes that *Pig Farm* "induces epileptic fits and seizures of laughter all right," but that the "repartee and slapstick grow tired, predictable, and irksome as the show progresses." He judges that "in the end, one concedes to the ridiculousness of the plot to uncover the heart and the humor in the otherwise over-the-top circus," concluding that "*Pig Farm* is, without doubt, for the carefree and liberal theatergoer who knows how to have a good time" ("Review: Pig Farm").

Like Glover, Garrett Eisler's review on *Playgoer* assumes a distance akin to the journalistic-critic. He writes that the play works as an "extended parodic sketch" ("Review: Pig Farm"), but judges that it needs to be tighter. He suggests that, "ideally the whole play would be a 90-minute ride instead six scenes across two separate one-hour acts" ("Review: Pig Farm"). He notes that the "chief pleasure of Pig Farm is to watch a cast of four terrific comedy actors" play Kotis's parodic "style to the hilt" ("Review: Pig Farm").

In contrast to Glover and Eisler, Joshua James presents himself on his blog *The Daily Dojo* as a playwright who, feels "a wee bit uncomfortable reviewing a new play," ("Pigfarm") preferring to discuss the dramaturgy of a play with more intimate and one-on-one approach to the more public nature of reviewing ("Pigfarm"). Having framed his response in that perspective, James praises the play for its potential, but judges that it "ultimately failed in the end." He writes that the play did not have "enough fun and games to make me laugh loud and long enough to justify the time spent. Not enough drama, no real moments or emotion that stayed with me after the show. That's it, it didn't MOVE me" ("Pigfarm"). James expresses interest in watching Kotis develop as a playwright and compares him to Sam Shepard whose plays had "the same problems in the beginning and didn't get them fixed until well into his career" ("Pigfarm").

James Comtois's review on his personal blog *Jamespeak* is conversational in style. He directly references Isherwood's review and disputes the *Times* critic's assessment that the play fails in its larger aim of satirizing the "excesses of the United States government and what he sees as the sluggish-minded, fat-bellied populace who



elected it” (“Pig Farm Offers”). According to Comtois, Isherwood misreads the playwright’s intentions. In Comtois’s view, *Pig Farm* has no larger aim “beyond making the audience laugh.” He writes:

From my viewpoint, Mr. Kotis and Mr. Rando are making fun of The Big Statement (or at the very least, using the convention of The Big Statement as a way to have fun). And Pig Farm is fun, despite Mr. Isherwood’s snide (and frankly bizarre) assessment. The cast and crew just go with Mr. Kotis’s frenetic script and make no apologies. (“Pig Farm”)

Overall, he judges that the humor of the play is uneven though “there were enough genuine belly laugh-inducing scenes throughout to make the show enjoyable” (“Pig Farm”). He explains what the play attempts to do, noting that “many authors often use comedy as a means for social commentary” but that Kotis was doing “the opposite: using social-political commentary as a means for comedy” (“Pig Farm”).

On *Parabasis*, Butler’s bias against Charles Isherwood plays a significant role in his review of *Pig Farm* whether intentional or not. He deems Isherwood’s review of *Pig Farm* “incredibly unfair and dismissive” (“This Week”) and not a “particularly good way” for Roundabout’s subscriber audience to “judge whether or not you want to see the show” (“Happy Pig Farm”). He asserts that other reviews had been written, both positive and negative, that “managed to engage with the material” (“Happy Pig Farm”) in more depth. He felt that Isherwood’s choice to compare the *Pig Farm* to *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* illustrated a lack of knowledge about the genre of the play.

Given Butler’s admitted bias against Isherwood, his assessment of the play’s critical reception may not be reflective of the entire range and depth of critical disapproval of *Pig Farm*. Of note is Linda Winer’s review for *Newsweek* in which she

writes that *Pig Farm* is “witless, pointless and unrelentingly idiotic” and suggests to her readers that if they think that “sounds like fun – and it clearly did to some theatergoers at a recent preview; then the mean and stupid have indeed inherited the earth” (qtd. in Broadway.com). Winer also compares the play to McDonagh’s work, writing that *Pig Farm* has “a jealous eye toward the splatter-gore, gross-out smarty business of *The Lieutenant Inishmore*,” but overall “even, that description is way too kind” (qtd. in Broadway.com). At issue is the visibility of the *Times* daily review and the likelihood it would have a greater impact on the Roundabout’s subscribers and potential single-ticket audience. Of particular interest to this study, is whether disputing the review of the *Times*’ critic as Butler and Comtois do is appropriate within the context of a review, a subject that will be explored in further depth later in this chapter.

Dan Trujillo’s post on his personal blog *Venal Scene* reads more like a response than a review. He doesn’t attempt to open up the work for the reader. There is no analysis of the production nor does he indicate how he feels about it. His blurb-style descriptions of the comedic style of play and its intention don’t communicate the experience of the play; rather he assumes that the reader will be able to infer meaning. He writes:

PIG FARM had the feel of a well-funded midnight show on old Ludlow Street, a send-up of the great American lyrical rural playwrights. Like Mel Brooks without the Borscht. All one expects from Shepherd or Steinbeck or Inge plays out on stage: the stoic American-Gothic characters, the flights of poetry repeated with Great Irony, the climactic acts of violence that Fertilize With Blood. Only it’s all ridiculous. (“Goddam Pig Farm”)

Claiming he does not do reviews on his blog *Collision Works*, Ian Hill writes several paragraphs detailing his various experiences working with Kotis. Hill refers to Kotis by his first name and states that the play was “funny in the deadpan, flat, deliberate-”bad”-writing style that Greg does so very well” (“Pearls Before Swine”). Hill observes that *Pig Farm* wasn’t as “deep or dark or multi-layered as his best work,” but concedes that if it were, “it almost certainly wouldn’t be playing the Roundabout at Laura Pels” (“Pearls Before Swine”).

On his blog, *On Theatre and Politics*, Matthew Freeman writes that *Pig Farm* is “a lot of fun,” noting that although he hadn’t seen *Urinetown*, he could “see why Isaac is so enthusiastic about this play” (“Pig Farm”). Freeman feels that the play is a “physically inventive comedy, gracefully enacted” and that “the language is joyfully bizarre and distanced. The direction GETS the text perfectly, and the actors all seem in just the right world. I laughed my ass off. I would. I’m 30” (“Pig Farm”). Freeman’s style is conversational and his point of view highly subjective. He expresses a clear bias toward the type of theater he likes and the audience he feels should be going to the theater. Freeman mentions that *Pig Farm* “received a negative review by Charles Isherwood” and in light of the *Times* ability to “make or break a show in this town” explores why “plays like *Pig Farm* (essentially the next thing out of the pen of the *Urinetown* team, and it’s brilliantly funny) gather so little buzz among their true audience” (“Pig Farm”). Freeman identifies several issues – dwindling audiences, restrictive ticket prices, and the difficulty of advertising a production with a limited run to a local audience who may be unfamiliar with the play. He offers Blogger’s Nights as a possible solution for turning “a risk-

averse, aging audience into a young audience, hungry for the next big play, checking the listings to see where they should go” (“Pig Farm”). He writes:

Not too [sic] toot our collective horns (we’re not anything to write home about yet) the fact is that media is far more democratic than it once was, and opinion is far less of a precious commodity. I’m sure Charles Isherwood and Ben Brantley don’t feel competitive with the blogosphere [sic], partially because they welcome (or I would hope they welcome) a healthy discussion of their criticism and an acknowledgment that someone is paying careful attention. Broad discussion is good for us. (“Pig Farm”)

The Blogger’s Night group came out in support of Kotis because he was an Off-off Broadway playwright getting a production in an Off-Broadway house. In his review, Eisler writes that the Roundabout production represents Kotis’s “*graduation*, in the eyes of the professional theatre world, into a bona fide ‘establishment’ playwright” (“Review: Pig Farm”). Most of the bloggers who participated in the Blogger’s Nights events were early career artists whose own work was being produced in OOB venues, thus they identify with Kotis and what his success might represent for the OOB community.

The reviews also express a desire to have work produced in larger venues that, like *Pig Farm*, reflects the aesthetic and socio-cultural concerns of their age group. In his review, James suggests that Kotis writes for an audience that “includes folks like me and the others there who get him and don’t get enough work presented to us on the big stage” (“Pigfarm”). He considers the show at the Roundabout “a missed opportunity,” explaining that the audience who “will enjoy PIG FARM the most aren’t the ones who are sitting in the audience for an Off-Broadway show” (“Pigfarm”). He notes:

That specific audience, one who would help the writer and director find the soul of just not that play but possibly their next play, won’t be in the house watching. That audience cannot afford to come to an Off-Broadway show. That audience won’t spend fifty bucks for a show. (“Pigfarm”)

Discussion on Eisler's blog revolved around ticket prices for *Pig Farm*, with an anonymous commenter asking whether *Pig Farm* was worth the cost and hinting that Kotis "probably doesn't care too much about pricing" ("Review: Pig Farm") since the success of *Urinetown*. It is unclear whether the commenter was trolling (deliberately trying to inflame) or whether he or she had a genuine stake in the community. The commenter asked whether "any of you playwright bloggers" would remember taking issue with the pricing of Kotis's play when their play was produced, or would they "be so exhausted, older, and hungry for a paycheck, that the matter of ticket prices will be forgotten when the career kicks in" ("Review: Pig Farm").

Explaining that prices guide the audience, Matthew Freeman suggests that *Pig Farm* "would be far better received by a younger, hipper audience" if the price were lower because "their dollar just doesn't go to \$55 dollar tickets for a two hour, four character, comedy that often" ("Review: Pig Farm"). John Branch affirms Freeman's comment, stating that he "might be persuaded to try to see" the play "if it were being presented at the kind of place where you can pull up a stool and grab a beer" ("Review: Pig Farm"). For Branch, Kotis's move into an Off-Broadway venue appears to "be a case where financial success for the playwright comes at the expense of his audience, i.e., the kind of audience that could best appreciate what he has written" ("Review: Pig Farm").

Summing up the comments, Eisler expresses disappointment in people's reactions to the *Pig Farm* Blogger's Night, observing that the experiment reveals "how keen people are to look for ways to knock other people's successes instead of building on them" ("Review: Pig Farm"). He explains that both he and Kotis had been accused by

anonymous bloggers “of having been corrupted by the system” (“Review: Pig Farm”).

He suggests that bloggers have jumped to the conclusion that “somehow Greg is to blame for what the Roundabout is charging for his show” and that he was “thus somehow out of touch with his roots/not caring about the little guy” (“Review: Pig Farm”).

Kotis’s musical, *Urinetown*, made the crossover from its Fringe origins to play in regional theater venues, but many bloggers note that *Pig Farm*’s humor and project did not connect with mainstream critics or the Roundabout’s audience. Hill observes that the “venue, audience, and critical community that surround this show seem to not be the right one for it” (“Pearls Before Swine”). For Hill, the mainstream critical response to the play highlight “what happens when a show with a confusingly different aesthetic and morals and messages” that would be acceptable on Off-Off Broadway venue “DARES to invade a “proper” theatre” (“Pearls Before Swine”). Hill writes:

While I hadn’t felt that *Pig Farm* was exactly the best play I’d seen in a long time, I liked it, and I felt good in that it WAS a play that you could have seen in some Off-Off space, where the best work happens not from people trying to create something that could move to a bigger theatre, but from people bored and tired with what they see in those bigger theatres creating new and interesting work that doesn’t fit the pigeonhole of “what sells on Broadway or Off-Broadway.” Funny way to think of it, huh? “Hey, that Off-Broadway play was good enough for Off-Off-Broadway!” (“Pearls Before Swine”)

Dan Trujillo observes that *Pig Farm* is the “most un-Roundabout show I’ve ever seen” (“Goddam Pig Farm”) and suggests that the sensibility of the play “seems – for lack of a more felicitous term – too young for Roundabout” (“Goddam Pig Farm”). He describes sitting “in front of an older couple on my left” whom he suspects were subscribers and who, “uttered not one chuckle” (“Goddam Pig Farm”). Trujillo observes that “to let go

of what one expects of a piece of art, even with a piece as good-time Charlie as PIG FARM, seems to be a stunt that the Roundabout subscribership might not be willing to attempt” (“Goddam Pig Farm”).

Matt Freeman remarks on the disparity between the play’s intended audience and the audience that attended the Roundabout production. He writes:

Basically, there [sic] crowd for this play didn’t really get it. I don’t blame them. It wasn’t precious, wasn’t meaningful and there weren’t any songs or moments of flashy stagecraft. It’s a big fatty cheeseburger from a Gourmet restaurant, cooked bloody red. It’s for those of us that go to Paul’s on St. Marks and don’t make reservations for French cuisine each weekend. It’s a play for the kind of people I WISH were going to the theatre more often. (“Pig Farm”)

An anonymous commenter responded to Freeman’s post stating he or she sensed “a certain out-of-line smugness in the blog reviewers’ comments about how this play was written for young audiences” and the bloggers’ characterization of the Roundabout’s subscribers as “far too old, staid, and fixed in their ideas to get it, and the rest of the easy stereotyping in some of the reviews” (“Pig Farm”). The commenter informed Freeman that they “saw Pig Farm tonight and loved it” and that “three other 55+ longterm Roundabout subscribers I went with” (“Pig Farm”) enjoyed the show as well. Contrary to Freeman’s assertion that the show would only appeal to a younger audience, the commenter noted that “the only other people I know who saw it were both under 35 and they walked out at intermission” (“Pig Farm”).

Thomas Garvey, a former critic for WBUR in Boston turned blogger-critic, *The Hub Review*, reacted negatively to Freeman’s review asking “Is this really the best these bloggers can do - complain about the ticket price (and actually try to “gauge” the quality

of the show against it)” (Hennessey “What Do We Do?”). He suggested that the bloggers “send your gripe to the landlords of the theater, kids” and advised against conflating “these concerns with the quality of the work in question” (Hennessey “What Do We Do?”). According to Garvey, the “only time a critic need concern himself (or herself) about ticket prices” is when “tickets are clearly out of line with current economic realities (i.e., if “*Pig Farm*” cost as much as - well - a Madonna concert!)” (“What Do We Do?”). Garvey asserted that “comparing the cost of a theater ticket to that of a mass-audience vehicle like a movie or an (illegally downloaded) song is NOT an aesthetically valid point” and likened it to saying “this show would be great if you could play it on your i-pod, but you can’t, dude, so it sucks to the max” (commenting Hennessey “What Do We Do?”).

Isherwood acknowledges a generational assumption about the value of theater, observing that “young people tend to think of theatre as being sort of an old-fogey art form that their parents go to,” thus they do not attend theater regularly. Isherwood also affirms that, “of course, the cost is a big deal” (65). The blogger reviews point towards specific differences in taste, expectation and willingness to pay for cultural experiences between the Roundabout’s subscribers, single ticket buyers, and the younger audience the theater was trying to reach. Since the purpose of Blogger’s Nights was to advocate for new work by reaching out to a younger audience with whom the material might connect, it seems reasonable to point out the disconnect between the play, the Roundabout’s audience base, the venue and the cost of tickets.



Many of the Blogger's Nights participants were early career artists whose own work was being produced in Off-Off Broadway venues, thus their reviews reflect a set of aesthetic values and artistic preferences that they feel differ markedly from the subscribers of Off Broadway or the readers of the *New York Times*. The reviews display a tension between the artists who produce work Off Broadway and the Off Broadway sensibilities endorsed by the *Times* reviewers, a situation that may have existed for at least forty years. Off-Broadway represents traditional, fourth-wall theater with older plays that are written in more conventional styles while Off-Off Broadway offers new plays by new playwrights that may be more challenging in form, content and presentation (Goldman 135). Goldman characterizes Off Broadway as a "product of the fifties" and Off-Off Broadway as a movement of that is rooted in the various avant-garde movements that began in the 1960's (132). Goldman details a Drama Desk meeting (date) in which George Oppenheimer, a critic for *Newsday*, asked a panel consisting of Gerald Freeman, Tom O'Horgan, and Richard Schechner the following question: "...I wish you'd tell me the answer: Why do you hate us? We don't hate you" (qtd. in Goldman, 136). Schechner responds:

Broadway isn't worth being contemptuous of. It's disappearing into high-rise buildings anyway. Something can be important in one of three ways: economically, socially, artistically. Artistically Broadway is of no importance. Socially, yes: we get together and talk, like now. Economically, it is of no interest: if it died, the New York tourist business would suffer slightly, but it has no effect on the gross national product and no one would mourn. There's no point in whipping Broadway; one wants to preserve it because of its quaintness. It's like the Alamo—a tourist attraction we should all remember (qtd. in Goldman 136 – 137).

The reviews reveal a frustration with the audience for Off Broadway theater and for what is perceived as an attitude toward these new plays that have moved uptown into the Roundabout and The Vineyard. There is also a generational bias on the part of the bloggers that borders on contempt. The next case study further demonstrates this friction.

*Analysis: The Internationalist*

The following bloggers participated in the event: Isaac Butler, *Parabasis*; Jason Grote, *The Fortress of Jason Grote*; Garret Eisler, *The Playgoer*; playwright, Adam Szymkowicz, *Adam Szymkowicz*; Tweed, *Obscene Jester*. The following bloggers also participated: Matt Johnston, *Theatre Conversation and Political Frustration* (review no longer on nytheatre.com); Mark Armstrong, *Mr. Excitement News* (invitation only blog); George Hunka, *Superfluities* (deleted). None of the reviews offered discount codes for tickets.

In his *New York Times* review, Charles Isherwood labels *The Internationalist* a “quirky, weightless comedy.” He describes the play as “willfully unintelligible” explaining how “scenes end suddenly or pointlessly” and that “essential questions remain unasked or unanswered, characters lack definition, non sequiturs await at every turn” (“Traveling”). He notes that “the play is like a jigsaw puzzle in which no two pieces seem to fit together, by design” and suggests that “for a while the spell of uncertainty and mystery it evokes is appealing, or at least intriguing, particularly if fuzzy narrative is your kind of thing” (“Traveling”). While he credits Washburn for her “wry, ambiguous dialogue,” he indicates that “the little shards of amusing dialogue become less frequent

and less satisfying as the play wanders on, with flickering signs of meaning dissolving as quickly as they appear” (“Traveling”). Isherwood writes:

For this viewer, Ms. Washburn’s scattered dramatic scheme failed to serve any purpose larger than leaving the audience, like the central character, in the dark. The play’s atmosphere, pregnant with sinister comic significance, suggests Lowell’s odyssey is meant to be a metaphor for something, but Ms. Washburn isn’t about to be so unsophisticated as to give us a clue as to what it is. (I would guess she’s a big fan of Caryl Churchill, but an intelligent order reigns in even the most oblique of Ms. Churchill’s works.) The most you can say is that *The Internationalist* makes a general statement on the cruel discombobulations of serious jet lag. I’m afraid this is not an agenda that’s likely to give pleasure to many in the audience. (“Traveling”)

On *Playgoer*, Eisler praises Anne Washburn for using “stage language for purposes other than showing off how articulate and overeducated” she was, noting that her “dialogue dramatizes, in different ways, how fractured communication between human beings can be” (“The Thugs”). He judges that “what keeps *The Internationalist* watchable is the looming menace and uncertainty of this world, and Zak Orth’s winning performance as a mediocre over-polite yuppie getting in over his head” (“The Thugs”). He also acknowledges a “nice subdued ironic tone to the play and the staging” which was “a welcome relief to the smug intellectualism and pandering sentimentality so common in the new plays that get produced” (“The Thugs”). Eisler observes that although “*The Internationalist* may not give you much to “take away” (though there is an ideological current of a parallel US/male hubris),” he was “fully engaged moment to moment by its original and idiosyncratic vision and, yes, language” (“The Thugs”).

Adam Szymkowicz begins his review on his self-titled blog by admitting he has “never really written a review on my blog before” (“Internationalist”), but suggests his

review of Washburn’s play may lead to more. Focusing on the lead performance of Annie Parisse, Szymkowicz feels the show suffers because of the absence of Heidi Schreck, who originated the role and who Szymkowicz disclosed as a friend. It was Szymkowicz’s opinion that Schreck “brought an energy to this play in the first two incarnations that could have made this production transcendent” He tries to articulate “what Heidi brought to the part that Annie didn’t” and notes only that “Annie is not a character actor and when she put on a wig to play an old woman it didn’t work” (“Internationalist”). He acknowledges that in contrast to Parisse, Shreck was able to bring her character’s storyline “forward which is more what I think the play needs” (“Internationalist”). He encourages his readers to go see the play and commends The Vineyard for producing the play (“Internationalist”).

Butler’s review on *Parabasis* begins by summarizing and linking to the posts of the bloggers who participated in the event. He then states that he cannot think “of a writer whose success we should be supporting as a blogosphere more than Anne Washburn” (“Happy Internationalist”). Butler also discloses that he is friends with Washburn and that he has worked with her, but explains that he supports her work because she is “a good writer” and has “been a downtown fixture for years, making challenging, interesting plays with companies like Soho Rep, 13P and The Civilians” (“Happy Internationalist”). Butler also notes how important he feels it is to celebrate and support the fact that The Vineyard, an Off Broadway theater was producing Washburn’s play.

Butler too cites Parisse's performance as "the show's one real draw back" because he finds her "too bland an actor for Washburn's language and for the world Schmoll and his designers have created for the play." Butler feels the satisfaction of the play is discovering the work as it unfolds and "unpacking the various inter-character dynamics" ("Happy Internationalist"). Butler acknowledges that, "if you're not doing that work, the play probably feels kind of empty and perhaps too clever," suggesting that was "certainly what Charles Isherwood thought about it" ("Happy Internationalist"). For Butler, Isherwood's review illustrates "a certain consumer mindset towards art" ("Happy Internationalist") and reveals an entitled attitude toward art. Butler writes:

I'm here he says, Now entertain me. This play doesn't work like that. Washburn won't do all the work for you. Some plays and playwrights do. Some great works of art are perfectly comfortable with a consumer audience mindset (Euridice, for example, which I loved, fits into this category). *The Internationlist* [sic] treats its audience as a co-creator of the event itself, as much has to be determined in the individual audience's mind while watching it. ("Happy Internationalist")

Similarly, Tweed, posting on *Obscene Jester*, mentions Isherwood's review and refutes his assessment that Washburn's intent is to purposely evade understanding. He explains that "opacity is not something to be admonished...when utilized well, it fosters a valuable uneasiness and discomfort; think Richard Foreman, Joan Jonas, Mabou Mines, Radiohole, even Beckett for goodness' sake" ("In Praise")! Tweed claims that "critics are setting up an artificial barrier between 'high' or 'performance' art and playwrighting [sic]" and assuming that "that Playwriting is supposed to lucid [sic], laid out for the audience, while performance is meant to be, well, weird" ("In Praise"). He finds the unwillingness of an audience member to "think about Washburn's play" and who tries to

“stop others from considering it...contributes to the narrative drek [sic?] that pervades the artistic zeitgeist” (In Praise). Noting that critically-acclaimed television narratives such as *24* and *Lost* reward audiences for being lazy and self-satisfied, Tweed proposes that “plays like Washburn’s [sic] can help awaken us to the more convoluted power relations and help the spectator reevaluate his or her position in the theatre and the world itself” (“In Praise”).

The bloggers’ reviews for both *Pig Farm* and *The Internationalist* demonstrate a perception that neither the subscriber audience for the Roundabout nor The Vineyard were open to the experience of the play, and the bloggers attribute this response to generational and class bias, pointing out that the function of the *Times* reviewers may be to affirm those biases in the interest of maintaining their subscriber base or the cultural values of the readership dictate the taste represented in the *Times*. Of all the reviews, Jason Grote’s on his blog *The Fortress of Jason Grote* most directly addresses this issue.

Grote directs most of his review at the audience and critical response to the play. He posits that Off-Broadway theaters often risk alienating “their existing audience base” and getting “a lousy review from Charles Isherwood” when they try to reach a younger audience by producing more challenging, provocative work. He questions the role the *Times* critic plays in speaking for and sustaining the audience’s perception about new work that strays from traditional narrative strategies. Acknowledging the authority of *The New York Times*, Grote wonders how the paper might cater to the tastes of its subscribers and how such a practice erodes critical function. Grote writes:

The powerful constituency it currently represents is that of the liberal consumer. Isherwood made a few nods to the review being his opinion,

which is pretty graceful for him, but the NYT presents itself as (and is often taken to be) the Voice of God, which pretty much negates his good intentions. (“Tough Crowd”)

In an earlier post Grote asserts that Isherwood is the “ideal representation of consumer mentality at work,” and that the *Times* is a “catalog of consumer products, whether those products are *Borat*, or *Lost*, or *The Iraq War*, or even the candidacy of Ned Lamont (“Warning”).” He suggests that the mission of the *Times* is to “sell upper-class liberal consumers to advertisers” and that a *Consumer Reports* model of criticism undermines theater and its artists. He writes:

...critics like Harold Clurman, Eric Bentley, Martin Esslin, and so on, made it their mission to champion artists that might not otherwise have mass appeal because their work was too odd, or too difficult, or required some unpacking. They weren’t right all the time, and they weren’t [sic] always nice, but they undeniably stood for something other than the prevailing winds of the marketplace. (“Warning”)

Grote notes that Isherwood’s critical responses are a sign of the current cultural context, but sees it as part of a larger problem – the difficulty of accessing the audience Grote intends to reach through his own plays, an audience that most likely does not read Isherwood’s reviews and are “probably not going to theater” (“Warning”). He states:

...until we can find ways to reach an audience that is involved in DJ culture, alt-literature, contemporary art, poetry, dance, indie music, internet art, political activism, graphic novels, whatever - we’re just dealing with symptoms. (“Warning”)

In the comments section James Urbaniak notes that Isherwood raved about Will Eno’s *Thom Pain*, a play that was not traditionally “audience friendly” and that “regularly provoked violent reactions (including my being hissed at curtain call one night by Paula Vogel)” (“Warning”). Urbaniak points out that in spite of audience reaction, Eno’s play

“nevertheless gelled for him [Isherwood] in a way that Anne’s play didn’t” (“Warning”). Grote acknowledges that “Isherwood’s support of Will Eno and Sarah Ruhl is laudable,” but explains that *The Internationalist* requires more work and acceptance on the part of the audience, which, on the night he went, it didn’t seem willing to offer. He writes:

I don’t feel a compulsive need to work at plays - but after seeing the hostile, lazy audience reaction to the play (people reacted with open hostility at Sarah’s big fake-language monologue at the end, presumably because they wanted a big, well-made-play-style payoff - meanwhile, the essential meaning of the speech was and is clear for anyone paying attention), I’m even more convinced of the accuracy of my post. Isherwood and these audiences deserve each other, but I’m not sure that the rest of us deserve either. (“Warning”)

While Rogoff admits that “it may be too easy, even too automatic, to charge” the *Times* with “setting corruptive standards that send powerful signals to critics, audiences, and other journals,” he acknowledges that the *Times* “continues to be positioned as the central arbiter, an imperial power telling the natives how to live” (Rogoff 279 1987), in effect enforcing and legitimating social differences attached to the consumption of art (Bourdieu 7).

Nick Fracaro, *Rat Sass*, questions the purpose of the Blogger’s Nights events. While noting that bloggers expressed “varying degrees of advocacy” for Washburn’s play, Fracaro holds that the function of Blogger’s Nights is not about engaging in a dialog with the play. Rather, their purpose appears to be to dispute Isherwood’s reviews in the *Times*, a practice Fracaro describes as writing “Contra-reviews” (“The Contra Review”). Fracaro feels that Blogger’s Nights were effectively “devolving the review model even further away from drama criticism” (“Contra-Review”). Fracaro identifies the bloggers’ writing as a recursive sort of speech, continually reflecting back on itself rather than



attending to its intended subject or purpose. When Isaac Butler writes, responds and links to the bloggers reviews “of the mainstream review,” Fracaro believes it becomes “obvious how far away from drama criticism this theatre-talk has moved” (“The Contra Review”).

Billington refers to blog reviews as “an informal letter,” noting that, “a review, if it’s to have any impact has to have a definable structure” ([guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)). Roberts observes that focusing on the “performance in itself, divorced from the personal and institutional contexts which may lie behind it” is the “culturally desirable business of criticism” (272). Thus, a review, unlike a feature or preview of a theatrical event, should be free of explicit quotations and references to relationships with artists thought to contaminate the evaluation being rendered. In order to protect and sustain the idea of judgment (Shrum Appendix A), the journalist critic’s review is staged in the paper and indicated by changes in headline font and/or labeling which operate as visual cues alerting readers that the text that follows is a critical evaluation and not another type of arts journalism. Such cues not only maintain the appearance of objectivity, but also preserve the “purity of the evaluation” essential to the concept of a critical review (Shrum Appendix A). Palmer identifies eight major functions of a review: to serve as a consumer guide, to document a theatrical event, to assess the value of the performance, to provide commentary and background, to instruct potential theater-goers, to entertain, to offer suggestions to performers and producers, and to advocate more support for the theater.

Advocating for the new is a valid function of criticism. Gilman notes that although “the critic is not the maker of dramatic art,” they are the person “most able to

say what it is, and at the same time to establish the conditions in which it may flourish or at least gain a foothold (18).” Thus, Martin Esslin and Margaret Croymen created awareness and appreciation for the works of Beckett and Ionesco while Mel Gussow wrote in support of Harold Pinter. Their critical efforts helped these artists and their work gain acceptance in the United States in the 1960’s. The function of their criticism was to first recognize and then advocate for the new, to educate and explain these new forms and styles of theater. In part, their critical work stood as a refutation of the critics who dismissed these playwrights, but their compass was pointed towards the work itself.

The critical act involves “monitoring the place of perception in the formation of judgment” (London 19) and constructing an identity, “an “I” that reveals and questions itself as it goes” (London 19). However, London cautions that the critics must never mistake themselves “for the subject, that is, the work of art being examined” (19). Thus, the critic’s identity is under constant negotiation and construction as it shifts between observation and evaluation. The critical writing of Lester Bangs serves as inspiration for this study. Bang’s reviews of Miles Davis’ 1972 recording of *On the Corner* and Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks* display the core principles of rock criticism – heightened subjectivity, emphasis on the social, cultural and emotional value of the music, and experimentation with form and content. In a longer form essay entitled *Free Jazz/Punk Rock*, Bangs directly addresses the reader and discusses their shared taste in music, thus the writer and the reader become subjects within the critical response. Bangs writes:

But before we get into this thing, I think it might be good for writer and reader to have a little eyeball-to-eyeball chat, if only to clear the air. As a probably regular follower of this magazine, your musical tastes I’d imagine are a little more refined, at least in certain directions, than the

average person's. Not trying to butter you up; it's just that, let's face it, for most people the whole subject of music and its relative importance in one's life can be summed up by the sales figures of the Saturday Night Fever soundtrack. (notbored.org)

Bangs' style could be wildly subjective, but music was always the central subject of his writing. In discussing *Astral Weeks*, Bangs admits that he doesn't understand the lyrics to the song, but explains that he would "like to approach it in a manner as indirect and evocative as the lyrics themselves" (23), asserting that one thing the music means "is Richard Davis's bass playing, which complements the songs and the singing all the way with a lyricism that's something more than just great musicianship" (23).

Bangs' writing demonstrates that voice is "not just style; it is also a kind of authority, a deliverance of confidence and persona that helps give meaning and shape to the critical self" (Powers 328). Christgau insists that the critic's voice must be his or her own, but notes that regardless of genre or critical perspective, the writer must honor the mechanics of craft. For Christgau "craft is best learned the way rock and rollers learn to play, not through formal training but by paying it the same level of attention you pay music itself" (421). Thus craft reinforces the critic's voice and invigorates the way the writer communicates about the subject itself. Christgau explains:

Of course we can't capture the magic of music in words. But we can surround them, approximate them, evoke them, open a window on them, open a window for them – if we get lucky, maybe even give them a shot of abracadabra. (421)

The next case study looks at the effect a blogger-critic's personal associations and ties to the community have on the function of their criticism.

*Analysis: Dying City*

Overall, Ben Brantley writes an enthusiastic, positive *Times* review praising Shinn for his “crafty and unsettling new play.” Brantley states:

...anyone who doubts that Mr. Shinn (“Four,” “Where Do We Live”) is among the most provocative and probing of American playwrights today need only experience the creepy, sophisticated welding of form and content that is *Dying City*. (Brantley)

He notes that, “it could be argued that *Dying City* would be even stronger if Mr. Shinn had limited his cast of onstage characters to Kelly and Peter, and let Craig emerge by inference.” He suggests that “of the relationships within the triangle, Kelly and Craig’s feels the sketchiest, more symbolic than fully lived.” He points out that “unlike so many contemporary plays *Dying City* raises obvious, important issues in anything but obvious ways” and that the play “knows too well that closure, that ghastly word, is a mass-delusional figment of the American imagination” (Brantley).

The playwright Christopher Shinn was one of the three artists who joined with Garrett Eisler in speaking out against the NYTW’s decision to cancel *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. In his review of *Dying City*, Eisler acknowledges his personal connection to Shinn, admitting that he “actually got to know Christopher Shinn as a person before as a playwright [sic]” and that Shinn had helped Mark Armstrong arrange the Blogger’s Night at Lincoln Center. Because of his relationship with Shinn, Eisler decides to structure his post as a series of “reflections upon an interesting play I’ve just seen that happens to be written by a friend” and labels it “an analysis more than an evaluation” (“Dying City”).

Noting Eisler’s disclaimer about his friendship with Shinn, Hilary Sanders comments on the ways critical discourse can be compromised by the critic’s relationship

to the artist. Questioning Eisler's objectivity, Sanders wonders whether he softened his response "knowing Chris Shinn, your new slightly famous friend who got you free tickets" (Playgoer "Dying City") was going to read the review. She suggests that the relationship is clouded on both sides, hinting that Shinn most likely did not help make arrangements for the *Dying City* Blogger's Night "simply out of kindness." Sanders observes that, "befriending snarky bloggers and fostering their good will is both smart and very much in a playwright's best interest" (Playgoer "Dying City").

Alison Croggan acknowledges that blogging exposes, "the network of relationships that underlie any participation in an artistic community" (Playgoer "Dying City"). Melbourne, Australia, where Croggan lives, has a small theater community, thus she explained that not only did she work "with some of the people I review," but in some cases, was "close friends with a few of them" (Playgoer "Dying City"). Croggan admits to spending "a fair bit of time negotiating - and evolving" her ethics as a blogger-critic taking care to practice full disclosure of the biases and filters through which she writes her criticism (Playgoer "Dying City"). Croggan explains:

I am upfront my aesthetic and preferences. I am upfront about my personal interests. I try to approach every review I write with the seriousness a work of art deserves, being as conscious as I can be of anything that is impinging on my perception of it: and I believe that criticism is useless if it involves fudging one's responses. (Playgoer "Dying City")

Croggan suggests that bloggers need "to negotiate in their own ways" through such relationships as there are "no rules on that one yet, aside from a seemingly tacit agreement that it's a good idea to declare one's own self interest, as Garrett does here" (Playgoer "Dying City"). Croggan also points out that journalist-critics are not exempt

from such considerations, but that their relationships were “simply less visible” (Playgoer “Dying City”).

Journalist-critics seldom acknowledge their personal prejudices or biases in print. Professional protocols dictate that they maintain a distance from their subject and the artists they review, thus they observe what Cote refers to as a “contract of ignorance” (“Critical Distinctions”). According to Cote, “knowing too much gets in the way of writing a good review of a given play” (“Critical Distinctions”). Knowing too much about the artists and the productions under review may cause the journalist-critic to “dilute the intensity” of their response,” thus making them “a booster for the artist” instead of an “ally for the ticketbuyer” (“Critical Distinctions”). Cote acknowledges that the situation leads critical function away from the subject and towards “the critic’s obsessions and prejudices” noting that “reviewing isn’t actual journalism, it’s opinion-mongering” and not “subject to the same rigor as journalism, even when the critic gets facts wrong or wildly distorts reality to fit an opinion” (“Critical Distinctions”).

Thulani Davis asks “whether we can be the same critic in various contexts” (24) explaining that it is important for her to develop a consistent voice that people can recognize so that they will “perhaps be able to guess that I am going to speak about this, that, or the other” (24). Davis speaks of the necessity of constructing a critical identity that reflects her point of view, which, she states “ has to do with regarding myself as a race woman, regarding myself as a feminist, regarding myself as somebody interested in experimental and contemporary work” (24).

Croggan calls for critics to eschew the role of a “Godlike representative of the mythically singular “Audience,” which she notes is “often the pose of mainstream critics” (Playgoer “Dying City”). Instead, Croggan proposes that the critic reveal and acknowledge their subjectivity within the critical act, arguing that such a perspective “makes for more interesting responses” (Playgoer “Dying City”). In her own practice, Croggan claims to write and publish her reviews with the idea that they are “up for argument” and exist as “part of a dialogue that is ultimately part of an ongoing meta-discourse” about the “nature of theatre itself” (Playgoer “Dying City”).

### Chapter 3: Free Tickets and the Role of Blogger-Critics

Blogger's Nights extend the phenomenon of the New York City theater blogosphere in a direction that appears to align it with the practice of journalist-criticism. The issue of free tickets perhaps more than any other highlights the in-between space that the bloggers occupy, bringing up questions of identification, legitimacy, and accountability. Discussion of these issues reached its peak in April 2007 when articles in the Spring Theater edition of *Time Out New York* questioned the ethics of the practice and cautioned readers about linking to theater blogs. It reads:

You know that clever theater blog you bookmarked, the one with inside dope on the edgiest shows and artists? Be careful—it might be a PR tool. Marketing departments have offered drama bloggers free seats to write about hipster-skewing plays such as *Pig Farm* and *Dying City*. Mind you, theaters don't demand positive write-ups; they just want the cool-kid buzz. (Cote, Feldman, Miller, and Simonson)

The article raises issues under discussion within the theater blogging community, but distorts information in such a way that it discredits the practice of Blogger's Nights and draws questions regarding the legitimacy of blogger-criticism. The article provides its own *official list* of theater blogs to bookmark and mentions three bloggers it deems trustworthy: George Hunka, Isaac Butler, and Jaime Green, all of whom participated in at least one of the Blogger's Nights events (Cote, Feldman, Miller, and Simonson). As the organizer of the Blogger's Night for *Dying City*, Mark Armstrong defends the events claiming that by "setting up these arrangements," bloggers are "creating and pursuing our own agenda, not reacting to offers of swag" ("Blogging Legitimacy"). Rather than being co-opted by the theater's public relations departments, he maintains that the community



is choosing “the shows we want to highlight for bloggers nights” (“Blogging Legitimacy”).

Butler observes that there is an irony in listing him as a trusted blogger given that the “practice that *TONY* is trying to expose in this piece” was partially his “idea in the first place” (“Blogging Legitimacy”). Moxie-the-Maven comments that she feels the article “from *Time Out* is an incredible put-down” and “especially shocking when David Cote is himself a prominent blogger” (“Blogging Legitimacy”). Besides Moxie, few bloggers publicly question how Cote balances his role as theater editor and chief theater critic for *Time Out, New York* with his participation in the theater blogosphere. It would certainly be appropriate to question whether there was any conflict of interest. Cote contributed to the *TONY* article and as editor he would have made the final decision to print it as written.

#### *Analysis: Dying City*

Beginning with the first Blogger’s Night for *Pig Farm*, anonymous comments were posted to Mark Armstrong’s and Garrett Eisler’s blogs that “persistently raised the payola question” (Eisler “Dying City”) in response to the structure of the events. *Dying City* was no exception. There was concern about the ambiguity of the role of bloggers and whether those who participated in the Blogger’s Nights events were operating as members of the mainstream press or else were being co-opted by the public relations departments of various theaters.

George Hunka suggests the blogosphere’s critical response to *Dying City* demonstrates that giving bloggers free tickets “does not ensure good virtual word of

mouth” (“Dying City”). Hunka stresses that the aim of the theater blogosphere is to offer “an alternative and/or addition to the critical dialogue surrounding theatre” (“Dying City”). He explains:

The theatrical blogosphere arose to supplement (and yes, in some but not all cases, to challenge), not necessarily to combat, the critical establishment found in the MSM: to offer a forum for alternative voices, and to allow those voices considerable freedom, of length and perspective, that for whatever reason can’t be found in the Times or Time Out New York. (“Dying City”)

Alison Croggon describes blogs as “part of the continuum of critical discourse around theatre,” but feels they will “only have impact” if bloggers are part of the ongoing critical discourse that includes the mainstream media (“Dying City”).

An anonymous commenter brought up several intriguing questions regarding how Blogger’s Nights shifted the role of bloggers. The commenter referred to earlier conversations on Eisler’s blog noting how “some bloggers held themselves apart from being identified with the mainstream media” (“Dying City”). For the commenter, bloggers who “write reviews and get press seats” are critics and function “like most reviewers in the MSM” (“Dying City”). Thus, the bloggers should no longer claim that they “aren’t part of the system” (“Dying City”). The commenter asked bloggers to consider how they would “feel about their blog reviews being cherry-picked for promotional quotes” and whether they were “prepared to honor official opening dates of all shows from now on” just as journalist-critics do (“Dying City”). The commenter pointed out that if the bloggers opt to honor the press embargo, they forfeit the immediacy of response that the commenter considered to be “one of their many charms, imho” (“Dying City”).

Remarking on the “strange dance of commerce between theaters and MSM reviewers” (“Dying City”), the commenter asked bloggers and readers to consider “what it means for bloggers” to participate in that relationship. The journalistic-critic’s work is situated in the conflux between marketplace pressures in the newspaper industry and the economics of Broadway production (Fosdick 92). Successful shows on Broadway and Off-Broadway stimulate the economy of the surrounding community by providing “commercial nourishment to innumerable dependencies – restaurants, taxis, tourism, and banks – by being recycled for movies and television” (Rogoff 279 1987). Because newspapers tend to cater to these special interests (Rogoff 279 1987), critics have “drawn into the commodity culture, left to traffic between manufacturer and the consumer” (Brustein 78 2002).

This situation appears to create a critical ecology that limits how critics perform their role and compromises the function of their criticism. Rising production costs create a hit-flop mentality in both producers and theatergoers that is fed by the critic (Winer qtd. in Nieman 5), whose work takes on the function of consumer guide, advising theatergoers about which shows are worth the enormous expense (Bentley hotreview.org). Gussow notes that the act of judgment is one of the end results of the consumer reports model of reviewing and does not reflect the full depth of critical engagement; rather the critic’s power lies “more in discovering work than in disparaging it” (XI 1998). London charges that the push to act as a consumer guide has lead critics to be less invested in their responses (19). Brustein argues that by indulging the hit or flop mentality, critics have “failed to provide a context for our criticism, or a consistent point of view or any

salient purpose other than a reputation for good taste” (78 2002). In Marowitz’s view, “journalism is the death of criticism” (“English”), explaining that “the obligation to convey information in order to inform consumers which shows to patronize snuffs out the waywardness and idiosyncrasy upon which great criticism depends” (“English”). Indeed, the NAJP study notes a perception among critics and the theater community that the scope and quality of criticism has declined (NAJP 75).

The commenter pointed out that the theater blogosphere lacked a method of determining who should be identified as a critic, and wondered whether anyone who blogged about theater should be allowed free tickets (“Dying City”). If not, by what criteria should bloggers receive tickets and furthermore, who could enforce and/or make that determination? Croggon considered the question of free tickets and attending previews a non-issue (“Dying City”), noting that “as a blogger who reviews” she received “complimentary tickets like all other reviewers” and that she worked “quite hard for them” (“Dying City”). Croggon felt that the quality of the content differentiated which bloggers could be identified as critics and that due to the nature of the blogosphere, the responsibility for quality lay with the individual blogger. Croggon emphasized that maintaining a “decent review blog is bloody hard work, and perhaps that work earns its own legitimacy” (“Dying City”).

Eisler admitted that “the issue of who pays for the tickets is an interesting debate,” but felt the question ought to be posed “across the criticism spectrum,” not only in the case of blogs “but all the way up the ladder to the *NYT*” (“Dying City”). The commenter concurred that “it would be healthier for the theater” if no critic received free

tickets “regardless of the platform they write on” (“Dying City”). However, George Hunka pointed out that requiring journalist-critics and bloggers to pay for tickets would put journalist-critics at an unfair advantage. Most bloggers would be priced out of the market, while “the *Times* and *TONY* would be able to absorb the costs for their own reviewers” (“Dying City”), thus re-establishing the critical hierarchy that was in place before the emergence of the theater blogosphere (“Dying City”).

Noting that he relied “on complimentary passes to abet the volume of shows I go to,” Aaron Riccio asserted that nothing was “wrong with entering a mutually beneficial arrangement with a publicist to do more of the thing one loves” (“Dying City”). He argued that “giving blogs the same access as giant media organizations isn’t making us cogs in that machine; it’s giving us a chance to work in parallel with them” (“Dying City”). Riccio does not receive free tickets for *Show Showdown*, “the four-person blog/chronicle/race to see the most shows in 2007 (“032607”),” but acknowledges that if they were offered he “would certainly take them” (“032607”). Riccio also receives free tickets for his work on *New Theatre Corps*, for which he serves as editor. He also acknowledges receiving tickets through his personal site, *Kul*, as well as his own connections (“032607”).

In January 2009, the Federal Trade Commission passed a regulation requiring that bloggers fully disclose whether they have received anything of material value in exchange for their opinions about any product mentioned on their blogs. Although the regulation was imposed unilaterally across the blogosphere, with bloggers caught in violation facing an \$11,000 fine, it remains to be seen how the regulation will be

enforced. Shafer suggests that “regulating bloggers via the FTC while exempting establishment reporters” is a de facto way of “licensing journalists and policing speech” (Shafer). Riccio states:

I don't understand the logic behind this policy. Producers and publicists don't have to disclose the nature of their pull-quotes. Newspapers and magazines, which employ freelancers like myself, don't have to note at the bottom of every review that they've gotten free tickets. Why am I being forced both to defend my right to an educated opinion and my work as a critic, simply because I self-publish? (“Disclaimers”)

For the blogger-critic, the reliability and integrity of his or her online presence is essential to building and maintaining a base of readers; it is the scaffolding that allows their criticism to fulfill its purpose. Should Riccio violate that trust by accepting money for writing positively about a show and convince his readers “to go and pay for something I actually think is awful,” he would forfeit his credibility and thus, risk losing his reader base (“Disclaimers”). Riccio now includes the following disclaimer in the sidebar of his blog:

Though this should go without saying, as a freelance arts-and-entertainment critic, the tickets (or books, or screeners) that I review are provided, free of charge, by publicists. As should be obvious to anyone regularly reading this site, that does not make me biased, and those interested in an exploration of potential biases I may actually have can look up the tag “metaDRAMA.” For FTC reasons, as of December, 2009, I will use the tag “Independent” when reviewing my own purchases. (“Disclaimers”)

Steve Loucks, *Steve On Broadway*, is the only other blogger in the New York City theater blogging community who publishes a disclaimer in observance of the FTC regulation. Loucks includes the following paragraph after every post:

In keeping with the new Federal Trade Commission (FTC) regulations that unfairly discriminate against bloggers, who are now required by law to

disclose when they have received anything of value they might write about, please note that I have received nothing of value in exchange for this post. (Loucks)

As an audience enthusiast, operating outside of the framework of journalistic-criticism, Loucks notes he does not “receive the media kits typically afforded to “professional” journalists from old media” (“Anytime”). Loucks feels he offers his readers “an unadulterated viewpoint of what I like and what I don’t and why” because he has “no vested interest, including from advertising dollars” (“Anytime”) in the writing that he posts to his blog (“Anytime”). Loucks describes himself as someone “who simply has a genuine love for the live theatre art form and writes about it for the sheer love of it” (“Anytime”). That love is what prompted Loucks to start his review blog. He notes that “with the exception of a mere two gratis tickets,” he pays for all of his theater tickets as well as his transportation costs to “places all over the country and abroad” (Riccio “Anytime”). He writes:

Because of my love for theatre, I write about theatre with a passion. No apologies. Given my investment in each show I see – both emotionally and financially – I have every right to review those shows as long as I remain honest and truthful. I believe the blogosphere has already proven itself largely self-policing to the point that we’re all kept honest. (“Anytime”)

The next case studies analyze two separate Blogger’s Nights organized by Playwrights Horizons – one for Adam Rapp’s *Essential Self Defense* and the other for extended previews of Kate Fodor’s *100 Saints You Should Know*. They examine the factors that may affect public reception of bloggers’ reviews.

*Analysis: Essential Self-Defense*

Rapp's play, co-produced by Edge Theatre Company and Playwrights Horizons, received a scathing review from Charles Isherwood, who calls the play a "self-conscious exercise in stagy attitudinizing," suggesting "it could almost have been composed by a computer" ("Ominous"). Isherwood finds the absurdity of the play "tiresome and grating; it's an empty gesture repeated endlessly and pointlessly" and observes that "little fresher are the other elements Mr. Rapp and his director, Carolyn Cantor, have assembled here, as if from an experimental-theater kit" ("Ominous").

Carolyn Cantor, who was also Edge Theatre's Artistic Director, attempted to neutralize Isherwood's review by sending an email blast defending the show and offering a wider spectrum of critical reaction. Cantor's email used pull quotes from several mainstream critics: John Lahr, *The New Yorker*; David Cote, *Time Out New York*; Frank Scheck, *New York Post*; John Simon, *Bloomberg*; and Dan Bacalzo, *Theatermania*. She wrote:

Indeed many critics – Mr. Isherwood notwithstanding – have responded enthusiastically to the production. Perhaps most exciting is that the community of theater bloggers, who represent a much younger and more adventurous audience than is typical have been enormously supportive of this production. (qtd. in Dressel)

She then invited subscribers to "click the links below to read what some New York theater blogs have to say about *Essential Self-Defense*" (qtd. in Dressel). The bloggers' pull quotes read as follow:

"ESSENTIAL SELF-DEFENSE is one of the very best plays I have seen in a long time."

"Wildly surprising and wonderfully offbeat."

"Adam Rapp's new play raises the fun bar." (qtd. in Dressel)



While both the bloggers' and the mainstream critics' quotes are being used as marketing tools, those of the bloggers, used without attribution, lack the legitimacy and authority associated with the quotes of the mainstream critics, whose names Cantor included. This subtle, yet significant difference in staging makes the bloggers' pull quotes seem more akin to word-of-mouth advertising than to criticism.

Mike Dressel, a contributor to the group blog *Culturebot*, defends Isherwood's review, feeling it "reflected the sentiments of several other media outlets" including *Variety*, the *AP*, the *NY Post*, and *nytheatre.com*. Thus, it was Dressel's view that singling out the *Times* review was unfair ("Debunking"). Dressel also includes the full text of Cantor's email in his post and suggests that her strategy in using blogger pull quotes was to demonstrate how "ya know, 'the mainstream' doesn't get it" ("Debunking"). Dressel commends Cantor for linking to bloggers, stating that "the blogosphere needs to make further inroads into theatre as it has in the areas of politics, pop culture and media, so inviting the blognoscenti is great" ("Debunking"), but he suggests that Cantor was not fully transparent regarding the context in which the bloggers wrote their reviews. According to Dressel, Playwrights Horizons "offered comps to the bloggers discount tickets to blog readers as a marketing tool and feted them with a "kegger" after the show ("Debunking").

As the blogging community began to weigh in on Dressel's post, it became apparent he had not fact-checked his information. Nor did he contact Cantor or any of the bloggers she had linked to in her email to question them about the context of their presence at the play. He did not contact Playwrights Horizons and inquire about the

parameters set for writing reviews, or confirm for whom the party had been given. The community was quick to emend and add to this information. The self-correcting nature of the blogosphere is both its strength and its weakness. Information is shared, but discussion of larger issues can easily generate “bad information, unnecessarily high emotions, and people freaking out about nothing” (Green qtd. in Ameer). Thus, the quality of the information relayed along with the distributed nature of the conversation can frustrate efforts to form a reliable accounting of an event. In a case such as this, basic journalistic practices would have provided an efficient structure for conveying information and assembling relevant details.

Garrett Eisler suggests that Cantor’s email represented a shift in the theater’s marketing, noting that perhaps Playwrights Horizons had “panicked about the results of this chance they took with an edgier playwright” and “smartly, shifted their marketing strategy with ads defying Isherwood and actually quoting bloggers” (“Bloggin’ Stuff”). He mentions that Playwrights had reached out to him for the two shows prior to *Essential Self Defense*, but notes he “passed on both due to other assignments and deadlines” (“Bloggin’ Stuff”). He wonders why he wasn’t contacted about *Essential Self Defense*. He asks:

Have the Playwrights people actually researched me enough to learn I’m over 30! That I write a lot of negative (or should I say “critical”) reviews? Ok, I flatter myself. But my point is, there was no clear blogger-blitz for *Essential Self Defense*, as far as I could see. (“Bloggin’ Stuff”)

Patrick Lee explains in Playgoer’s comments that “as a matter of record: I was contacted by PH to see *Essential Self-Defense* and I did accept the offer” (“Bloggin’ Stuff”). Lee

seemed unaware of an organized Blogger's Night, noting only that he knew that "Rocco, at *WhatBlows*, was also invited" ("Bloggin' Stuff").

On his blog *What's Good/What Blows in New York Theatre*, Rocco responds to Dressel's post pointing out that "between papering services, friends, work, ushering, connections, Equity, family, etc. I rarely pay for tickets to anything. Most people don't" ("A Brief Scathing"). He denies that free tickets would sway his opinion observing, "there are no biased opinions here" ("A Brief Scathing"). He tells his readers that if they would "prefer that that [sic] my theatre tickets were paid for, then I can provide you with an address for you to send me your money" ("A Brief Scathing").

Jaime Green writes on *Surplus* that she is the only blogger who attended the party, which was advertised to the under-30 audience and promoted as the *Essential Self-Defense Post-Modern Post-Prom Lock-in Mixer* ("ARG!"). She discloses that she received information about the show and the after party "as a subscriber to Edge's mailing list" and states that bloggers had not been "specifically invited" ("ARG!"). Having written a review of the show, she notes, "for the record, I paid for my ticket" ("ARG!"). Commenting on Green's post, Jason Grote labels the incident a "non-scandal" and compares it with the *Time Out New York* article published earlier that week. Noting that both question the ethics involved in organized Bloggers Nights, Grote asks:

Is there a dirty conspiracy of theater producers seeking to use the blogosphere to con all those unsuspecting internet [sic] people to see theater they wouldn't otherwise see? If it is a scam, they're doing a terrible job of it. And is our upstanding critical establishment really doing such a good job of protecting the audience from bad theater that the comps (which mainstream reviewers ALSO get, of course) are such a huge ethical issue? ("ARG!")

Butler suggests that because bloggers have “no institutional support,” there is an assumption that they “are necessarily more ethically bendable than mainstream press,” but finds “it odd that people think a free ticket is all it would take to buy us off” (“Defending The Defense”). As Butler notes, it is common practice for “companies to give out free tickets” and that one of the reasons they do so is because they are “hoping the people who see the show will somehow spread word of mouth about it, be they press, bloggers, or members of Audience Extras” (“Bloggng Legitimacy”). Defending the purpose of Blogger’s Nights, Butler offers the reviews from *Pig Farm*, *The Internationalist*, and *Dying City* as evidence that the “participants in bloggers nights [sic] and people who’ve gotten free tickets to shows have behaved admirably and honestly” (“Bloggng Legitimacy”). In Butler’s view, bloggers were committed to figuring “this whole experiement [sic] out, including its ethics” (“Defending The Defense”).

Mac Rodgers, *Slow Learner*, comments that more time was needed to assess whether “there’s an ethical issue here” (“Bloggng Legitimacy”). He acknowledges the possibility for theater companies to “screen or cherry-pick bloggers who tend toward positive reviews,” thus he suggests that bloggers should disclose whether they receive free tickets (“Bloggng Legitimacy”). Butler also feels that more transparency is needed across all media. He writes:

Should theaters disclose that they give free tickets to press? Should they disclose after every pull-quote in the *Times* that they also pay for advertising there? Should we as producers disclose that we put together very complicated press kits so that the critics need to do much less work at researching the material they’re seeing? (“Defending the Defense”)

James Comtois explains that the reviewing policy for his blog was “very simple: if a company gives me free tickets to see their show, I will review it. Period (“Blog Reviewing”).” Emphasizing that “getting the ticket for free in no way shapes my opinion of the show,” Comtois acknowledges that if he were “expected to write about a show, pay the \$70 to see it and not get paid” (“Blog Reviewing”), then he would not attend the show. Describing his experience with public relations representatives for theater companies, Comtois notes that publicists were professional and took care to maintain a distance and kept “schmoozing with the reviewer to a bare minimum.” He elaborates:

The ones I’ve been involved with have been polite and accommodating, but in no way have tried to act like my “buddy.” They help me confirm my ticket, make sure I get a press packet, say hello, and leave me alone. That’s how they often work and - more to the point - that’s how they should work. (“Blog Reviewing”)

Comtois reiterates that Blogger’s Nights represent “another option for companies to get their work reviewed and discussed” and that there is no intention to “overhaul or undermine the reviewing system” (“Blog Reviewing”).

An article published on the *The Gothamist*, a website featuring New York news and cultural reporting, questions whether Bloggers’s Nights could provide an effective counterbalance to the *New York Times* without an editor to enforce ethical standards with regards to the acceptance of complimentary tickets. Del Signore’s article solicites comments from anyone who knows of “verifiable instances of bloggers hyping a show they didn’t like in exchange for comps” (Del Signore). Jaime Green comments that bloggers are “used to occasionally getting into things for free,” stating that she has not “heard of anyone falsely praising a show because they got comped” (Del Signore).

Echoing Comtois, Green's view was that marketing directors for theaters, such as Playwrights Horizons, took care in negotiating their relationship with bloggers. She writes:

Most ticket offers come with a request, rather than an in-exchange demand, for a mention on the blog, and often (Playwrights Horizons, again) this includes an explicit invitation to write \*any\* response, good or bad. They're just trying to get the word out. (Del Signore)

Green's comment brings up important considerations worthy of exploration. The first has to do with whether Butler and Armstrong's original intention for Blogger's Nights was compromised when the publicity department of Playwrights Horizons organized the events. Further, in what way does the context by the review affect its function?

On March 12, 2007, Moxie posted a discount code for *Essential Self Defense* on her blog, *Moxie the Maven*, and credited Playwrights Horizons for "smartly embracing the blogosphere as a marketing tool by offering a special discount to MY readers" ("Playwrights Gets Hip"). She published her review the following week, writing that Rapp's intentions are "almost entirely obfuscated by the layers of craziness he's piled on, and things aren't helped by Carolyn Cantor's over-the-top staging" ("Rollerskating Dream"). She notes that she saw the show in previews so suggests that "maybe they'll make some good cuts and adjustments and find the focus" ("Rollerskating Dream").

Rocco also shared the discount code for the show in a separate post ("Essential"). He posted his review on March 29, 2007, a day after the show opened. Rocco judged that *Essential Self Defense* "may not be for everyone, but its one of the very best plays I've seen in a long time" ("Essentially I Think"). He writes:

Rapp proved how well he understands the power of our underlying feelings of guilt and fear in his work before, and here he lays it bare by removing the naturalism so prevalent in most other plays and showing outright, who we are, how we became who we are, and why we don't always know how to handle what we've become and what society has turned us into. ("Essentially I Think")

Rocco mentioned Isherwood's review claiming he considered it an attack on young artists ("Essentially I Think"). He encouraged readers to "go see *Essential Self Defense*," admitting that he could not "promise you'll like it like I did...in fact maybe you won't, but it's worth an evening of your time I guarentee [sic]" ("Essentially I Think").

On March 9, 2007, Patrick Lee posted a discount code on *Show Showdown* that was good for the first month of performances linking directly to Playwrights Horizons and providing phone numbers to the Ticket Central Box Office. He wrote the following disclosure:

Why am I posting this? I get comped into the show in exchange for blogging the discount offer, but in the interest of full disclosure let me tell you that I already have a season flex pass to Playwrights Horizons. I would have been able to see it anyhow without having to crack open my wallet again. I'm posting because the question I most get in my inbox is how I can afford to see so many shows, and part of the answer is discounts and deals like this one. I'm posting because this play features *Doubt's* Heather Goldenhersh and Paul Sparks from *Landscape of the Body*. I'm posting because Adam Rapp, Pulitzer nominated last year for *Red Light Winter*, is a young playwright with his own distinctive voice and style and I want to support that. Don't you? ("Discount Offer")

Lee posted his review a week later, noting he "saw an early preview" but that the "play is already tight and all the performances are already on the same page of quirky heightenedness" ("Essential Self-Defense"). He calls the show "all kinds of fresh and fascinating, a sensationally unique comedy that flirts with absurdism and whimsy while

always grounded in a dark vision of (perhaps especially American) fears and anxieties.” He feels Rapp managed his material well by balancing “the gravity of what’s fear-based and dire” with offbeat comedy and “flashes of David Lynch-like deadpan, Christopher Durang-like satire, even the false cheer of especially sad Dennis Potter musical numbers” (“Essential Self Defense”).

Aaron Riccio begins his review wondering, “Am I just not hip enough for *Essential Self-Defense*” (“Essential Self Defense”? He observes that “dysfunctional humor is all too easy to write: just introduce characters who constantly say the unexpected (e.g., "Dolphins don't talk to terrorists") and you've got yourself a script” (“Essential Self Defense”). He writes:

I sincerely hope that Rapp grows up and does more with his talent than these shallow amusements. Sweet as the roller-skate scene is, perverse as Klieg the Butcher is, ridiculous as Yul and Sadie are about grammar, is this the best we can expect of modern comedy? The trappings of form without the substance of soul? (“Essential Self Defense”)

Riccio does not post a review of the show on either the *Kul* or *New Theatre Corps*.

David Bell compares the play to *Jack Goes Boating*, but suggests that it is a “sharp, borderline absurdist examination of fear in America” (“Essential Self Defense”). He writes that the two lead actors “bring SO MUCH in terms of characterization to this play” that he “would not be surprised if the two leading roles were written specifically” for them (“Essential Self Defense”). The play opened on March 28, 2007. Bell’s post is dated March 25, 2007 indicating he saw the show and published his review while it was still in previews (“Essential Self-Defense”).



Patrick Lee posts a more in depth review on *New Theatre Corps*. He discloses seeing an early preview of the play, but emphasizes that, “*Essential Self-Defense* is already sharp and in-shape. All it needs now is to be seen” (“*Essential Self-Defense*”). He did not include a discount code.

Excepting *The Internationalist* and *Dying City*, bloggers were provided with discount codes for *Pig Farm*, *Essential Self-Defense*, and *101 Saints* to publish along with their responses. Although no one specifically cites the discount codes as an issue, their inclusion in the Blogger’s Nights may indicate one point where promotion effaces advocacy, and could contribute to the perception that bloggers had been co-opted by the public relations departments associated with various theaters. While Moxie, Rocco, and Lee shared the code in separate posts, Green published it along with the review as other bloggers had done with *Pig Farm*.

For Jaime Green, being in the audience for an under-thirty night performance gave her the sense that the “play was being performed for me. Not just for me, but for this entire audience, that I was very much a part of” (“No Child Passover”). She writes:

I wasn’t being made aware of watching a play, disassociated from empathy or engagement, but it was also the most different that watching theatre has ever been for me from watching a film. I wasn’t just a disembodied consciousness in the dark. And it was powerful. And exciting. (“No Child Passover”)

Stating that she “didn’t go along with some of the choices,” she judges that overall it is a “gorgeous production – and engaging” with a “solid ambiguous ending that I very much loved.” Green mentions Isherwood’s review, pointing out that the show was not “quite selling like mad” because of the “unfortunate power of a single, obnoxious-if-not-100%-

wrong review” (“No Child Passover”). She also discusses Cantor’s email effort to off set Isherwood’s review (“No Child Passover”).

Sontag advocates a critical practice that helped to turn down the noise in the culture so that the work itself could be revealed (Sontag 13), but it may be the case that blogs are increasing the noise and distortion around experience of the artwork. The democratization of opinion and the ease of distribution via new media such as blogs, Yelp, Facebook and Twitter, and the theater message boards such as TalkinBroadway.com’s *All That Chat* act to conflate opinion, word-of-mouth advertising and formal criticism. According to Fracaro, “reviews have long lost all value as legitimate aesthetic criticism, functioning instead as a consumer report” (“Friday Roundup”) and suggests that theaters bought Butler and Armstrong’s idea “essentially for its PR value” (“Friday Roundup”). While Fracaro notes that, “there is certainly nothing unethical in this,” he considers it “disingenuous to claim that the PR product, bought and sold, was not at the core of this transaction and agreement” (“Friday Roundup”). In the consumer reports model of criticism, theater is positioned as an object to be consumed. Klein notes that when cultural objects are viewed as popular and accessible, then “every consumer feels qualified to be a critic” (3). Under such conditions, the “critic whose task is to deliberate on popular culture is in a way no match for the “word-of-mouth” criticism belonging to the public” (3).

In Fracaro’s estimation, the writing produced by the Blogger’s Nights events serves the public relations market “at least as much as the reviews in *The Times* and *TONY*” (“Blogging Legitimacy”), a point that is of particular relevance. Billington

acknowledges that, “we live in an age of relentless PR” (“Who Needs”). Journalistic theater criticism competes with publicity – in the form of extended interviews with artists, advertising and other promotional materials provided by producers use the public relations model to promote their shows (NAJP 72, 74). In light of this convergence, it is Kalb’s view that “few young people today would understand why a piece based on talking to an artist about his background *isn’t* criticism” (50). Kalb states that the “objectivity and the expertise that go into real criticism are foreign” to younger readers “because the whole media culture conspires to confuse them about the difference between criticism and public relations” (50 2009). It is unclear whether this conflation signifies confusion or whether the younger generation to whom Kalb refers are simply more adept at parsing the conversation-as-market (Searls 82) dichotomies of Web 2.0, thus are more comfortable with the overlaps and less concerned with making such distinctions. Indeed, regular theater blog readers express confidence in their ability to distinguish between critical blogs and public relations-oriented blogs. James observes that public relations blogs “don’t discuss or embrace, they don’t argue, they only tell” while “critical blogs be it of theatre or screenwriting or film are about the discussion” (Del Signore).

#### **Chapter 4: Standards and Practices and the Expression of Critical Function**

The next case study is important to examine because of the questions it provokes regarding ethics and standards in the theater blogosphere and how the blogger-critic's role should be defined. While noting that bloggers posted reviews of previews performances, it was not within the scope of this study to record the regularity of the practice. The circumstances of the following case however, further highlight the grey area in which blogger-critics had been operating and raises questions about whether they ought to observe press embargoes, their responsibilities toward artists and the work they review, and their obligations to establish an ethical framework for their judgments.

In September 2007, Playwrights Horizons invited several NYC bloggers to attend preview performances of Kate Fodor's *100 Saints You Should Know*. Much like *Essential Self Defense*, Playwrights Horizons' publicity department arranged the event by contacting individual bloggers via email. The following bloggers wrote posts, David Bell, *Show Showdown*; Patrick Lee, *Show Show Down*; Aaron Riccio, *Show Showdown* and *Kul*; Rocco, *What's Good/What Blows In New York Theatre*; Jaime Green, *Surplus*; and George Hunka, *Superfluties*. From the comments on various blogs, it appears that an arrangement was made to provide bloggers with a complementary ticket in exchange for writing about the show on their blogs. Aside from that, it seems there was little structure to the event; no specific night was designated a Blogger's Night performance and bloggers did not attend as a group.

*Analysis: 100 Saints You Should Know*

George Hunka's review on his blog, *Superfluities*, is no longer available on his site, nor is any of the discussion that took place on his blog. In the redesign of his webpage, posts have been deleted or omitted from the *Superfluities* archives. However, as noted in the bibliography, Hunka's post for *100 Saints* is available via the Internet Archives. Hunka's review begins with a list of the production team and actors as well as the performance schedule and location. He linked to the theater's website for more information and tickets. Hunka then reviewed the show quite negatively:

Poor *100 Saints*, perhaps – workshopped within an inch of its well-intentioned but pale, weak life. I left at intermission, I'm afraid, not compelled to return by the tree-injury ex machina that closes the first act, but since Ms. Fodor, the director, the cast and Playwrights Horizons are producing a play that knows more about itself than the playwright or any of the creative team, I hope nobody will take the above words personally. (“101 Saints”)

Leonard Jacobs, *The Clyde Fitch Report* and Editor of *Backstage West*, questioned the ethics and fairness of Hunka's choice to write and publish what Jacobs deemed a “formal review of a play in its third or fourth preview” (“George Hunka Gives”). According to Aaron Riccio, Playwrights Horizons was not necessarily looking to have the show reviewed, rather, they “wanted to get conversations started in places where there might be forums for it” (“A Good Example”). He noted that sites such as *TalkinBroadway.com* and blogs such as *On Theatre and Politics*, *Parabasis*, as well as Hunka's blog, *Superfluities*, are excellent sources for discussion (“A Good Example”). Jacobs agreed, but insisted that when a theater or public relations representative invites “people to print, publish, upload or post something” in exchange for tickets (“A Good Example”), they are

in effect issuing press tickets. For Jacobs, the acceptance of complimentary tickets signifies an established code of ethics that obliges the critic to observe the press embargo, a practice he views as “necessary for anyone who is going to write a review, period” (“Why Do Bloggers”). It was Jacobs’s opinion that bloggers ought to comply with the press embargo and withhold their reviews until after a show had opened; thus, Hunka had breached what Jacobs felt were the conditions under which the tickets were provided. Moreover, Jacobs viewed blogger-critics’ disregard for the press embargo as symptomatic of a larger problem – the lack of a standard of ethics and practice (“Moving On II”).

Before accepting tickets to the show, Riccio asked Playwrights Horizons whether they preferred he write a review or a blog post. Noting that he was asked to write a blog post, Riccio felt free “of any obligation (as a print/online critic) to wait for an embargo” and suggests that Hunka was exempt as well (“George Hunka Gives”). Matthew Freeman noted that since the theater had “invited free and open commentary about their production, without specifying any embargo date or any notation and previews,” Hunka’s actions, as far as writing about the preview, were “encouraged by the institution itself” (“More Hunka”). Hunka indicated that the email he received from Playwrights Horizons “seemed to encourage early posting” (“100 Saints”), their only condition being that he post “after seeing the performance” (“100 Saints”). Hunka pointed out that Patrick Lee and David Bell had posted their reviews of *100 Saints* on *Show Showdown* two days before he had (“100 Saints”).

In an earlier discussion, Riccio made a distinction between reviewing and writing a blog post, noting that in his own practice, he viewed his blogs and his reviews “as separate entities” (“Dying City”). He cited *Show Showdown* as an example of a blog, considering the work the group produces “to be a valuable, albeit snarky and unprofessional, asset to anyone looking to see what’s out there” (“032607”). He acknowledged that although the “gimmicky nature of the site may explain why it is one of the first blogs to have been featured in the Arts & Leisure section,” he felt the writing on the blog was “genuine and produced out of a real and undeniable love of theater” (“032607”). In contrast, *New Theater Corps* was “an attempt to widen the scope of thoughtful criticism to a younger perspective, but with a professional approach (modeled, I guess, after MSM)” (“Dying City”). He writes:

One works within the system, one works without; both media have access to comps. I post without anonymity because I believe in accountability, and if anybody wants to respond to my reviews or mine them for quotes, that’s their right: I mean what I say (I just say it more casually on the blog). (“Dying City”)

Since blogging is a self-defined practice, it is difficult to contest Riccio’s differentiation between blogging and reviewing. In looking at the reviews of *100 Saints* published on *Show Showdown*, there does not appear to be a unifying editorial structure other than what is imposed by the Blogger template. The structure and style of the blog reviews is left to the individual contributor.

On *Show Showdown*, David Bell gives the play four and a half stars noting, “an exceptional production has just started previews at Playwrights Horizons” (“100 Saints”). He writes:

The themes of Kate Fodor's beautifully crafted drama are so clearly (and heartbreakingly) delivered by her finely drawn characters that she has rendered her 8 paragraphs of Playbill notes (including the phrases "It's a play about..." and "The play is also about...") obsolete. Musing on religion (or the absence of), loneliness, and parent/child relationships this often funny/often sad play provided perspectives and insights that were as modern as you could get. The 5-person cast is top-notch including Zoe Kazan and Will Rogers brilliantly playing teenagers with all of the rage and awkwardness that comes with it. And I FINALLY got to see Lois Smith onstage. That was a special treat. This one's a keeper. ("100 Saints")

Patrick Lee shares a discount code for the play and links to Playwrights Horizons website and Ticket Central. He also includes the box office hours and address as well as the phone number for Ticket Central. Of the play, Lee writes:

This production, directed with sensitivity and clarity by Ethan McSweeney, boasts a flawless ensemble: all five actors (Jeremy Shamos, Lois Smith, Janel Moloney, Zoe Kazan and Will Rogers) make strong characterization choices that enrich the play's humor while remaining connected to the sadness of the characters. In a word, *100 Saints* is a gem. ("100 Saints")

Riccio writes a brief post linking to his lengthier review at *Kul*. He writes about a specific scene from the play that contains what he describes as "the quietest, most fragilely beautiful moment on stage this year" ("100 Saints").

Riccio's post on *Kul* begins by explaining Playwrights Horizons' goal for the extended previews and linking to a discount code provided by the theater. He notes doing so because he feels the theater charges too much for previews. He summarizes the play and talks about the direction and the performances. In closing he writes:

Ultimately, *100 Saints You Should Know* is shaping up to be a very sincere show, filled with outstanding performances and some aching beautiful moments. Perhaps it's too much to ask that you know a hundred saints, but try hard to see this everyday one. ("Play: 100")



Croggan notes that in Melbourne, where she lives, bloggers have been accepted as part of the “general discourse,” but acknowledges that the line between “official and bloggy reviews” can be unclear (“Flogging”). Indeed many of the Blogger’s Nights reviews support her observation. In looking at the other blog reviews of *100 Saints*, it is not clear whether the bloggers consider what they write a review or a blog post, or whether the distinction matters to them or to their readers. It is not clear how the reviews are intended to function. They are written in a hybrid style, mixing journalistic-criticism with a casual, chatty tone and revealing varying degrees of personal subjectivity and connection to the artists or theaters mentioned in the reviews.

Rocco’s review on *What’s Good/What Blows In New York Theatre* describes *100 Saints* as “a quietly understated play about lost souls struggling to connect to anything and anyone” (“You Should Know”). He acknowledges that the play is missing “the thinnest veneer of pain that I think exists in these five characters” but expresses confidence that the cast will be “hitting it out of the park” (“You Should Know”) by the time the play opens. Rocco also links to the discount code provided by the theater and reminds younger readers they can get deeper discounts at the box office 1 hour prior to showtime [sic] (“You Should Know”).

Jaime Green discloses on *Surplus* that she “used to be a script reader for The Vineyard” and describes *100 Saints* as one of the “few plays I read then that I loved very much and haven’t forgotten” (“100 Saints”). She writes:

This is a really beautiful, delicate, perceptive play, one of those great sad & funny incredibly true portraits of humanity. I still remember when in my script report for the Vineyard writing about the power of these characters who desperately want to connect, try valiantly, and still come

up short. I can talk all I want about not liking realism, but beautiful writing is beautiful writing, and Kate Fodor's play is beautiful. ("100 Saints")

Green tells readers there are "several ways to see it for cheap" ("100 Saints"). First she encourages them to subscribe to Playwrights Horizons because it was "the best way to get the cheapest tickets" ("100 Saints"). Acknowledging that some readers may only want to see *100 Saints*, she links to the discount code others had included in their posts. Finally, she mentions that readers "might be able to usher," telling them, "I'm not sure, but if you'd be interested, e-mail me, and I can find out, and put you in touch with the right person. Then you'd get to see the show for free" ("100 Saints").

Debate over Hunka's walkout evolved into a larger discussion about the practice of extended previews. Art Hennessey, *Mirror Up to Nature*, pointed out that neither the Playwrights Horizons webpage nor the online ticketing service made a clear delineation between previews and opening night ("George Hunka Gives"). In light of this, he questioned whether critics should be obligated to observe press embargoes. Citing Brendan Kiley's early review of *Young Frankenstein* for the *Seattle Stranger* that addressed the issue of obscuring previews from opening night, Hennessey admitted that he "wouldn't have a problem with print and mainstream critics pushing back a little bit against this practice" ("George Hunka Gives"). Riccio felt that regardless of when a review was published, it was "a critical, but still at heart opinionated, appraisal of a work as is" ("Any Time"). In Riccio's opinion, reviews can be contextualized to allow readers to assess the writer's opinion within a specific frame of reference. He writes:

As long as the format of the production you saw is acknowledged — i.e., during previews, with an understudy, &c. — then I see no reason why

\*THAT\* performance cannot be objectively (and comprehensibly) covered. That's like saying the beta version of a software shouldn't be reviewed: not so. Such appraisals (often called "previews" but really, simply semantics—i.e., what if I just add a small "p" to my "review"?) are useful to people wondering about the process, the show, the buzz, and more. ("Why Do Bloggers")

Riccio noted that a tryout production of *The Little Mermaid* in Denver was "getting reviewed there, and read about by interested audiences" in New York City ("Why Do Bloggers"). He pointed out that when the production moved to New York City it would undoubtedly be different and it might "have a new director" ("Why Do Bloggers"). In light of this, Riccio asked, "does that invalidate the right of critics over there to review what they saw" ("Why Do Bloggers"). Riccio also noted publicists' practice of using reviews of past productions to market revivals that could be "potentially different versions," ("Why Do Bloggers") thus, bearing no resemblance to what critics had written before ("Why Do Bloggers").

Several bloggers questioned the practice of producers charging full price for extended previews while drawing benefit from the press embargo. Pointing out the high cost of tickets for *Spring Awakening* that played at the Atlantic Theater and *Rock 'n' Roll* in London, Riccio asked why the audience "should stay willingly in the dark" ("Why Do Bloggers"). Thomas Garvey commented that previews "should be cheaper, and obviously marked as previews," but observed that audiences do not "seem to care half as much about these issues as reviewers do" ("What Do We Do?") He mentioned several Boston theaters that had been "charging full price for previews for some time" ("What Do We Do?"). By expanding preview runs, producers accept that they will be marketing the show without critical support. Broadway musicals, especially those based on popular

movies, have a certain amount of critical immunity, thus, as Garvey explained, “if the market will pay full price for a preview, it’s hard to see why they [the producers] shouldn’t take advantage.” Putting a positive spin on the situation, Garvey suggested that Hunka’s review demonstrated “to Playwrights Horizons, and no doubt other producers, that at least some bloggers won’t play ball” (“What Do We Do?”).

Freeman asserted that Playwrights Horizons viewed the controversy resulting from Hunka’s walkout “as all good business,” asking “how many people are talking about *100 Saints You Should Know* right now? Tons. And it’s still in ‘previews’” (“George Hunka Gives”). Grote acknowledged that “word of mouth has been important since long before there ever was an internet [sic]” (“The Blogger Review”), but expressed doubt that the controversy surrounding *100 Saints* would “affect the life of the play at all” (“The Blogger Review”). He writes:

I just returned from Playwrights’ Horizons and no one there - including the director and playwright, and their literary manager - had any idea any of this was going on. I’m not scolding anybody, but I don’t think there’s any downside to being realistic about blogs’ current relevance or lack thereof. (“The Blogger Review”)

There is a difference between generating conversation under the auspices of word-of-mouth advertising and engaging in a critical practice that engenders discussion of the work itself. In the case of both *Essential Self Defense* and *100 Saints*, the controversy generated by bloggers’ reviews or reactions to their reviews overshadowed their critical assessment of the play. Grote explains:

I find it really illustrative that hardly anybody seems to actually be talking about the play in question; it’s more like, talking about talking about talking about it. The play itself becomes a sort of pale residue on the

conversation - the only thing that remains [sic] of it is the fact that George didn't like it. ("Blogger Review Fracas")

In Jacobs opinion, Playwrights Horizons broke "its compact with its artists and with the rest of the media by saying bloggers are fully welcome to review a production in an early preview but the rest cannot" ("Moving On III"). Jacobs contacted the Association of Theatrical Press Agents and noted that while a representative of the organization acknowledged the "changing nature of theatre press," neither the ATPA nor the League of American Theatres and Producers, which jointly control press lists sanction the practice of "inviting bloggers to review early previews" ("The Apologists"). Jacobs's view is that regardless of form or medium, when a blogger accepts free tickets, he or she is thus obligated to uphold the standards of journalistic practice. Jacobs writes:

Playwrights Horizons can take this disingenuous stance that they are not press tickets, but they are, and standards of ethical conduct must be expected of anyone who accepts those professional comps in exchange for posting something, including reviews. ("Moving On III")

Jacobs' insistence on holding bloggers to journalistic standards and ethics appears to be a well-intentioned attempt to make them accountable for their actions. For Jacobs, standards and ethics are independently held and applied; as such, they are implicit and in force regardless of context or medium. In this particular case, where no conditions for publishing were stated, Jacobs interpreted Hunka's action as indication that Hunka felt he was not "required to hold, or to demonstrate, or to espouse any personal ethics or responsibilities" of his own accord ("Moving On III"). Freeman's observation that theater blogging is "still in its formative years" ("The Apologists") indicates that there

might be differences in practice between blog-criticism and journalistic-criticism, whether or not they are self-evident. He writes:

...whatever standards that [sic] mainstream press has are long-standing and even those have exceptions and contraversies [sic]. The fact that the blogs are still working it out, and that there are transgressions and questions of taste is to be expected. (“The Apologists”)

Arguing that if theaters and their publicists considered blogger-critics “good enough and valuable enough to be given professional comps,” Jacobs stated that bloggers should be “considered part of the critic and journalist community and put on the first- or second-night lists along with everyone else” (“Moving On”). Jacobs framed the debate under a “separate but equal” argument while stating concurrently that his “position is to bring certain blogger-critics into the fold, not to keep them out of it” (“Moving On III”). Jacobs references a set of bloggers he deems worthy of inclusion in the journalist-critic community providing they adhere “to the same ethical standards as everyone else” (“Moving On III”). According to Jacobs, acceptance into this community would require blogger-critics to trade their independence and autonomy for what Jacobs sees as the “tremendous respect, power and influence (“Moving On III”)” offered by mainstream media. However, the establishment of such a hierarchy among blogger-critics devalues the democratic nature of blogging and normalizes the blogger-critic’s practice by imposing the standards of journalistic-criticism, thus masking the differences in practice and purpose (Boyd) that could also define the role of the blogger-critic and their engagement with the community.

Blogging crosses the boundaries “between journalism and other forms” of writing; thus blogger-critics and journalistic-critics often stake out the same critical

territory and perform some of the same tasks (Lowery 478), but it does not follow that blog-criticism is an extension of journalistic-criticism. Journalistic-criticism might be one practice that a blogger-critic could choose to adopt; however it need not define the practice of all blogger-critics. Likewise, the blogger-critic's praxis need not be an extension or a repudiation of the journalist-critic's; instead, it has the potential to enact distinct interventions within the realm of critical discourse (Matheson 33).

As Lowery notes, occupations exist within a framework of professions and institutions that influence and protect the work processes with which it is associated (478). There is no codified system that dictates the behavior of journalist-critics (Wonderful Town 74). Neither is there a licensure or accreditation procedure for journalists, thus journalist-critics are "heavily reliant on cultural legitimacy," or the public's perception of their legitimacy (Lowery & Anderson). Whether freelance or fulltime, the journalist-critic derives a certain amount of legitimacy and authority from the institution for which he or she works (London 19, Brustein 8 1980). The journalist-critic also derives authority from membership in professional organizations. In 2010, the International Association of Theatre Critics, IATC, established a Code of Ethics, outlining for its members what were deemed as "core professional guidelines" (IATC), but like the standards laid out by the Society for Professional Journalists, journalist-critics voluntarily adhere to the standards and practices they observe (SPJ) or else they comply with the ethical guidelines in force at the institution for which they work.

Accordingly, the *Times* outlines specific ethical guidelines for its critics and arts journalists. The policy observes that, "critics and reviewers have an obligation to exert

our newsrooms' influence ethically and prudently" (*New York Times*). While recognizing that "its staffs include talented members who write books, music and plays; create sculpture and paintings; and give recitals," the company cautions against establishing relationships with publishers, production companies, artists, or galleries that might "give rise to the fact or perception of favoritism" (*New York Times*). Thus, staff members must disclose such arrangements "to newsroom management, and when appropriate the staff members may be disqualified from covering those with whom they have dealings" (*New York Times*).

Lacking institutional support, bloggers establish their authority and legitimacy through the construction of an online presence that engenders trust. Trust is built temporally, through the persistence of the blogger (Mortensen and Walker 272) writing post after post, in much the same way novelists construct their narrative authority throughout the novel. Trust forms the scaffolding that allows a blogger-critic's work to fulfill its purpose. A reader identified as Herxanthikles affirms this idea, stating that ethical behavior alone is not a determining factor in whether the blogger-critic earns their trust ("Blogging Legitimacy"). They explain:

The critics I like have built their trust with me through hundreds of reviews, and if they are new on the scene, I can usually tell with one or two reviews whether I like their writing, their taste, and whether they seem to have their head together. If a critic is spineless enough to skew their review positive just because they got a free ticket, odds are I've long ago stopped reading them. ("Blogging Legitimacy")

With no institutional network to insulate them, Riccio acknowledges the community's concern that bloggers might be "more likely to pull punches, in the interests of keeping



their doors and options open with all the publicists” (“Disclaimers”). However, Riccio is quite clear about his role as a critic. He writes:

If I don’t like your show, I’m going to say so, albeit as constructively as I can. I’m not really worried about being pulled off a press list: the sort of shows likely to be represented by someone with a distaste for honesty are probably the sort of shows that cannot survive without a healthy slathering of lies. (“Disclaimers”)

Riccio indicates that the enforcement of protocols between publicists and bloggers is more socially derived (“Dying City”). Noting that bloggers are under no obligation to a publicist “when getting tickets,” Riccio acknowledges an implicit etiquette that, if unobserved, is akin to ignoring the “formality at a dinner party;” dinner party guests who overstep the boundaries are “not likely to be invited back” and likewise, bloggers who ignore “*review dates* may find themselves cut out of the loop” (“Dying City”).

In an online environment, trust is created through transparency – the process of consciously and systematically exposing personal biases, affiliations, and potential conflicts of interest. Recognizing “transparency as the touchstone of ethical blogging,”

Blood cites the following guidelines for creating a transparent practice:

Publish as fact only that which you believe to be true.  
If material exists online, link to it when you reference it.  
Publicly correct any misinformation.  
Write each entry as if it could not be changed; add to, but do not rewrite or delete, any entry.  
Note questionable and biased sources.” (Blood 2003)

Mitchell and Steele agree that transparency is a key “first step in building trust with an audience,” however, they note that transparency alone is “insufficient to achieve credibility” (Mitchell and Steele 1). Codes of ethics such as those suggested by Blood (“Weblogs”) and Dube (“A Blogger’s Code”) tend to emphasize form over function and

are based on values associated with journalism. Because blogging entails a wide range of practice, there may be blogger-critics such as Eisler or Glover whose critical practice assumes the structure and objective tone of journalistic criticism. Those practices will inform the content of what a blogger-critic chooses to disclose. Since journalist critics receive complimentary tickets that they are not required to disclose within the context of their reviews, so too might a blogger-critic who assumes the practice of journalistic criticism choose not to make such disclosures as well, assuming that such exchanges are implicit in the practice.

It is also the case that blogger-critics, while performing similar journalistic tasks, may not believe that the standards and ethical codes established by the “mainstream media are quintessential” to their practice (Boyd). For Blood, the “vast majority of bloggers will continue to have a very different mandate from journalists,” noting that “as media participants” bloggers are “stronger and more valuable working outside of mainstream media rather than attempting to mirror the purposes of an institution” they should “seek to analyze and supplement” (“Weblogs”). Recognizing that blogging entails a diversity of practice, Mitchell and Steele maintain that individual bloggers need to establish their own principles and processes that guide their behavior. They explain:

Both groups – traditional journalists and bloggers – face significant challenges in terms of credibility and ethical conduct. For the traditional journalist, it’s a matter of measuring up to existing, generally accepted standards. For bloggers who have not yet addressed the issue, it’s first a matter of figuring out what their standards might be – and *then* measuring up. (Mitchell and Steele)

Along those lines, each blogger critic could determine the purpose of their criticism and develop their practice around that. Further, they might engage their readers in a “co-

authored process that addresses the personal information” the blogger is “willing to share, the principles they stand for, and the processes they follow” (Mitchell and Steele). Many bloggers publish disclosure statements or dynamic FAQ’s that outline their personal and professional affiliations.

For the blogger-critic, an FAQ can function as the editorial foundation for his or her critical practice, explaining how the blogger-critic expects to perform their tasks and interact with their readers, as well as the artists whose work he or she evaluates. An FAQ may consist of a few lines on an *About* page or as paragraph in the sidebar. Among the New York theater bloggers included in this study, Riccio and Loucks were the only two who attempted to delineate the boundaries of their practice. Stating that he did not “believe in mixing blogging with criticism” (“032607”), at one point Riccio maintained two personal blogs: *That Sounds Kul* where he published reviews, and *metaDRAMA* where he explained he would “make comments on my comments, and on the selected musings of others” (“032607”). *MetaDrama* was a space where Riccio began to develop and share his “own theories on the necessity of blogs and where I consider my own work to be situated” (“metaDrama”). He researched critical function and wrote essays about his reactions to the various critics whose theories of practice he thought were most thought provoking. Riccio labeled these essays metaDRAMA, and they are searchable by that tag. Thus, a reader can go back through the posts and trace the evolution of Riccio’s critical practice, and understand his biases and his ground rules for reviewing. He writes:

Aside from having pretty high expectations and slight biases toward original, straight dramas, I think of myself as a pretty objective critic.

That's why I'm willing to have open discussions on this site, especially when I take a harsh stance; I think it's important not only that we understand where we're all coming from, but remember that we're all coming from a different place to join together in appreciating art. There's nothing wrong with disagreeing, so long as you've got a factual (i.e., not emotional) reason for doing so.

Riccio speaks directly to his readers, describing his reviews as “steps in a personal journey to find an ideal form of theater, or a flawless company” (“Thanks, Rob”) and inviting them to join him on that journey, “learning where their tastes match mine and where (and hopefully why) they diverge” (“Thanks, Rob”). Riccio has also established boundaries for his practice – explaining to theater companies, directors and producers that “I don't want to know anything about your show before I see it: if you wouldn't put it in a press release, don't mention it to me. (I'm going to ignore any pull-quotes you include from previous productions.)” (“Thin Red Line”). Acknowledging that as he becomes friends with artists, “it can be hard to remain open and objective,” Riccio stresses the need for a self-imposed boundary that “allows both parties to engage and yet when it comes down to the critical moment, keep their distance” (“Thin Red Curtain”). He explains:

After my review is up, feel free to post, e-mail, whatever. So long as you're talking about the work itself, I'll respond. That's where my line in the sand is--that's about as much distance as I need. Given that, I can karaoke with you one day and talk about your work the next, without feeling an ounce of bias, because we both know where we're coming from. (“Thin Red Curtain”)

In 2009, Ken Davenport founded the Independent Theater Bloggers Association (ITBA) with the intention of providing “structure to the quickly growing theatrical blogosphere” (ITBA). The ITBA invites the participation of bloggers from all over the

country and the globe, but the majority of members are part of the New York City blogging community. The annual ITBA awards, created to “give new media voices a chance to recognize excellence” on Broadway, Off-Broadway, and Off-Off Broadway (ITBA), are a method of externally enhancing the theater bloggers’ status and creating a public perception of legitimacy. However, because the awards only recognize productions that take place in New York City, some members feel they are left without a voice in the process. At the time of this study, the organization was fragmented because of disagreement about the structure and function of the group. Moreover, creation of a legitimizing organization does not in itself normalize practices within the medium.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

The impetus behind this study has been the examination of the critical practice of bloggers in the New York City theater blogging community. Three case studies of Blogger's Nights organized by Isaac Butler and Mark Armstrong were contrasted with two events arranged by Playwrights Horizons to illustrate the predominant aspects of this emergent practice. Historical analysis of rock criticism served as a vehicle for studying how new genres of criticism can establish a function and express their purpose outside of the auspices of accepted journalistic standards. Tasks shared by both journalist-critics and blogger-critics were identified in order to analyze how the medium in which they were performed might determine and affect their purpose.

Perhaps the most significant factor shaping the function of the blogger-critics' reviews were the various controversies incited around the events themselves. Discussions generated by the reviews were often framed by hot button topics such as the acceptance of complimentary tickets and whether bloggers had aligned with mainstream journalist-critics or were being co-opted by publicists at the various theaters that hosted the events. The immediacy of the medium combined with a propensity to focus on controversy or generate comments to inflame rather than engage in lively, spirited debate diverted energy from the project as a whole and overshadowed the critical assessment of the work the bloggers intended to support. The Blogger's Nights reviews often disputed the reviews of Charles Isherwood and this too, defocused the bloggers from their purpose and continued to affirm the primacy of the *New York Times*.

The *Pig Farm* reviews were most on task in terms of evaluating and discussing the play itself. Comtois and Butler disputed Isherwood's review, but Hill, James, Eisler, Trujillo, and Freeman also raised issues regarding ticket price and venue that seemed pertinent to the Roundabout's attempt to appeal to a younger set of theatergoers. Eisler and Glover's reviews assume the critical distance of the journalist-critic, while those of Butler, Comtois, Trujillo, Hill and Freeman reflect the viewpoint of a younger theatergoer with a particular set of values that seem opposed to what they perceive are the preferences of Off Broadway audiences and the *Times*. Their tone overshadows their critical assessments, appealing perhaps to those with a similar point of view.

Furthermore, the reviews of *The Internationalist*, *Essential Self Defense*, and *100 Saints* offer a hybrid review model – characterized by a casual tone and a lack of filtering and editing that exposes varying degrees of personal and professional connections in the community. The reviews do not point outward to any recognized standard of quality, reflecting a very personal set of preferences and seem to function more as word of mouth advertising than as criticism. In contrast, the casual tone combined with the revelation of personal affiliations in many of the blog reviews in this study blur the neutral boundary that Shrum insists is necessary to preserve the integrity of the critical act (Shrum Appendix A).

With few exceptions there was little intentional experimentation with form or content. Although blogs remove space constraints, with the exception of Hunka and occasionally Butler, it is rare for a New York City blogger to engage in long form criticism. Jonathan Kalb points out, “the web has changed people's relationship to

reading news and criticism.” Because time is limited, people expect information to be organized in shorter segments. Citing *HotReview*, the online journal he publishes as an example, Kalb suggests that, “the limit of comfort at the computer is about 1,500 words,” which he considers “a particularly unfortunate loss there for the theatre.” He writes:

The theatre is one of the last remaining forums that can accommodate long thought. That’s almost unique to the theatre among performing arts today, and it’s precious in this wired society. The challenge is: how to do critical justice to those longer thoughts in little 300-word snippets (Kalb).

For Billington, blogs have “supplanted the kind of prolonged arguments about the arts that once took place in correspondence columns of newspapers” (guardian u.k.), observing that the discussions they generate are compressed and driven by the immediacy of the medium. He compares a blog review to an informal letter noting that a “review, if it’s to have any impact, has to have a definable structure” The structure of the printed review, with its “restrictions on space and time” forces the writer “to focus on the essentials” (guardian u.k.).

It is not clear from observation how successful the Blogger’s Nights events were in terms of outreach, nor was it within the scope of this study to measure however; it would have been easy enough for theaters to identify and track ticket sales resulting from the discount codes the bloggers published in their reviews. Theaters continue to designate certain performances as Blogger’s Nights and may organize talkbacks, Q & A’s with the cast of a show, or pre-event meetups, but Butler and Armstrong’s goal of forming a grass-roots constituency of blogger-critics was a short-lived experiment (“The Blog Reviewer”). In retrospect, Butler feels the events fell short of the purpose he envisioned and that the bloggers’ efforts to advocate on behalf of new playwrights being



produced in Off Broadway venues “didn’t really help that much” (“The Blog Reviewer”). Initially, Butler had thought that if bloggers were accepted as a legitimate critical force and given the same privileges as journalist-critics, they could provide an alternative voice to that of mainstream journalist-critics and theater subscribers, thus enabling the group to advocate for new work and helping to develop an audience that would be more likely to embrace it (“The Blog Reviewer”). However, Butler did not anticipate the community’s reaction to the events nor did he foresee the obstacles the bloggers would face in legitimizing their practice. Butler also recognizes that accepting tickets from producers and publicists of Off-Broadway and Broadway shows diluted the community impulse behind the “the gesture of us going to see plays as a group” (“The Blog Reviewer”). In moving forward, Butler acknowledges that many of the blogger-critics are “writing really interesting stuff, and I think that’s great” but feels there is not “much to be gained by reviewing shows as a blogger” unless someone wanted “to be a professional reviewer in which case go and God bless” (“The Blog Reviewer”). He writes:

The tireless enthusiasm that my fellow bloggers put in to fiercely advocating for better (and more interesting) theatre is where i [sic] get my inspiration, and I think those with likeminded ideas banding together to do stuff is where something interesting could happen. (“The Blog Reviewer”)

Grote points out a tendency for online communities to have an “exaggerated sense of importance” (“The Blog Reviewer”). He claims that “one of the reasons why blogger’s nights haven’t yet been successful is because we’re mostly talking to each other,” which is “fine if people want to do that, but that’s not going to unseat the hegemony of corporate media anytime soon” (“The Blog Reviewer”). Observing that “blogs may increase in number,” he feels their influence was limited and pointed out that

the conflation of marketing and reviewing that occurred in the Blogger's Nights reviews, the tendency to engage in the "the ad/consumer paradigm," had "failed the whole blog/critical enterprise ("The Blog Reviewer"). Noting that inviting bloggers to his shows was good for generating word of mouth, Grote explains that, "as someone who has attended these things in the past, I don't have any illusions that bloggers or anyone will have the same effect an MSM outlet would" ("The Blog Reviewer"). Matt Johnson, *Theatre Conversation and Political Frustration*, points out that the theater blogosphere could become redundant, noting that the bias of the *New York Times* "that comes from their corporateness has begun to equal the biasness that blogs have for their maringalizedness [sic]" ("Raising the Bar"). He explains:

Personally I think blogs are an awkward adolescent stage in internetopia. I was very much into reading those who tend to treat their blogs more like journalists for awhile. But after awhile, I became bored with it, because it wasn't really all that much different than print media. ("Raising the Bar")

The process of deliberating the issues posed by these case studies demonstrates one of the unique aspects of the blogosphere – that the community can determine values and standards and can hold the blogger or blogger-critic accountable for their actions. As the anonymous comments from the *Dying City* case study demonstrate, there is division in the community over the role of blogger critics and concern about their relationship to mainstream journalist-critics. On one side were Butler and Armstrong and the participants in the events who embraced the motivating intention of Blogger's Nights, advocating for new work and reaching out to theatergoers who would support the work as it moved into Off Broadway venues. On the other were readers and/or bloggers who valued the outside the mainstream media status occupied by the theater blogosphere; they

viewed the adoption of practices associated with journalistic-criticism such as accepting free tickets and organizing the events themselves as signs that blogger-critics were relinquishing that status and would become an extension of the mainstream media.

The theater blogosphere is still a new phenomenon and in its early stages of development. The Blogger's Nights events were an ambitious undertaking. They presented the community with a unifying project, but the community itself lacked the authority to establish itself as a legitimate critical force. In trying to mobilize the New York City theater blogosphere, Butler and Armstrong may have underestimated the amount of organization the project required in terms of creating a structure and methodology to define the boundaries and focus of their purpose. In order for the Blogger's Nights reviews to have fulfilled their function, perhaps a more neutral boundary was required. As a way of preserving the community-oriented nature of the event and to account for the self-defining nature of the blogosphere, those who wanted to participate might have negotiated guidelines for attendance and publishing as a group. Thus, bloggers could have established the authority they needed to exert their influence as a coalition.

In setting itself the task of providing an alternative to *Times*, it may be the case that bloggers assumed practices associated with journalistic criticism because it may be the practice with which most artists and blogger-critics were familiar. The involvement of mainstream critics such as David Cote and Leonard Jacobs may have contributed to the further privileging of those practices. While difficult to track, both critics exerted influence in the community that seemed to derive from their status as mainstream

journalist critics and their propensity to incite debate in the community. In Cote's case, this tendency appears to derive from his view that the function of blogs was to provoke rather than to offer insightful commentary. In that light, Cote wrote a post for *Time Out's Upstaged* blog encouraging the New York City blogging community to "mix it up more" ("Fixing New York"). Cote acknowledges that his intention behind writing the item was to "generate noise." He explains:

Does it take a *Rachel Corrie* fiasco to generate heat? The theater blogosphere has been dull, insular and quiet lately. We need more arguments, more dirt, more bloody knock-down-drag-out fights. Not just self-promotion, obscure manifestos and production diaries. And here's hoping for a new breed of long-form critics worth reading. ("Fixing New York")

A few bloggers, including Butler, Moxie, Freeman, and 99seats responded to the provocation on their blogs, but took a studied view of post. Many responded in the comments section on *Upstaged*; those comments have since been removed. Butler reflected that while "some writers really enjoy the white hot intensity of a fervent argument for its own sake," he was "not one of them" ("Engage/Enrage"). Butler explains if he were to "write a post attempting to engage/enrage and enter into a knock-down drag out fight about New York theatre," he would most likely "end up attacking someone who is at most 2-3 degrees removed from myself" ("Engage/Enrage"), thus it was not to his advantage to write posts that might provoke or anger people with whom he might potentially work.

For Grote, "the dynamics of internet discussion resemble the dynamics of communities, games, or other models more than they do traditional media" ("The Blogger Review"). Grote points out that people read reviews by the *Times*, the *Voice*,

and *Time Out, New York* because they want to “find out what their reviewers and reporters think about culture” while “people go online to talk, among many other things” (“The Blogger Review”). A healthy critical ecology fosters discourse and engagement as Wolk confirms, noting that he sees “a whole lot of arts criticism of all kinds every week, and most of it is totally inert: it doesn’t affect what art people choose to experience, or the way they respond to it” (Wolk qtd. in Spurgeon). Wolk explains:

If a piece of criticism leads to a conversation, then it’s acting in the world, and deepening its readers’ engagement with its subject. I also think the value of conversation-provoking criticism is probably greater on the Web than in print: readers of a book or newspaper don’t think of themselves as part of that publication’s community, but the discourse on a lot of good Web sites is one-to-many-to-many. To put it a different way, “good post kicking off a worthwhile discussion” beats “good post.” And conversations started by work itself tend to be small and low-key: it usually takes a reaction stated with clarity, precision and force to get them moving, at which point we might as well call that reaction criticism. I suppose trolling is a sort of guaranteed conversation-starter, too, but I think there’s a big difference between phrasing one’s actual opinions in a way that’s likely to provoke a response and randomly jabbing a pointed stick into a crowd (Wolk qtd. in Spurgeon)

There is still a dividing line between mainstream journalist-critics and blogger-critics, with the main point of contention being the legitimacy and authority of blogger-critics and whether their writing constitutes criticism at all. Because arts journalists and mainstream journalist-critics control the larger public forum in which the debate over blogger-critics and their practice takes place, they can frame the issues and the context in which blogger-criticism is viewed. For example, David Cote wrote a post for the TONY blog *Upstaged* about all the publicity that *Spiderman: Turn off the Dark* had garnered. He refers to a review posted by Isaac Butler. Butler paid for a ticket and reviewed the show on his blog, noting:

The performance of Spider-Man: Turn Off The Dark that I saw was, obviously, in previews. I paid full price for my ticket and I have no deal with producers where they give me free tickets in exchange for waiting to see a show when they want me to. I also think that custom is somewhat arcane and should be rethought, but that's a post for another day. The show at this point has had a longer run than most of the plays I've directed put together, and the issues outlined above aren't going to change in a meaningful way, even if the show itself might improve in some small ways prior to its opening, whenever that turns out to be. ("Spiderman")

David Cote states that he will "refrain from arguing whether or not his [Butler's] post constitutes a bona fide, official "review"" ("Tune In"). While mentioning that Butler had been "expanding his profile as an arts journalist with various pieces," it is Cote's view that was "not a theater critic" ("Tune In") and maintained that the review did not conform to the "technical specs of a theater review" nor was it posted on "a site that bills itself as a source of creditable arts reviews" ("Tune In"). Leonard Jacobs describes Butler's lengthy post as "quite manifestly a review" ("Ensnaring Theater Critics"), noting that it included "a detailed assessment of the production, the story arc, the special effects, the performances and even the audience" ("Ensnaring Theater Critics").

The discussions that resulted from the Blogger's Nights in New York may reflect a similar pattern of concern as blog criticism becomes more prevalent in other communities. There also continues to be misperceptions and assumptions about the purpose and function of blogs. Rick Culbertson, a theater producer in Los Angeles, proposes setting up an accreditation process that would be implemented by the LA Stage Alliance. This process would designate official journalist critics and what Culbertson refers to as "word of mouth bloggers" ("Organizing the Bloggers"). Culbertson explains:

Here's how it would work: Any writer who wants to be designated as an official Los Angeles Arts Journalist/Critic would submit a selection of

their work for review. The committee would then evaluate and score their work. Writers who receive a high score, would receive accreditation from the LA Stage Alliance and be designated as a LA Stage Alliance approved Arts Journalist/Critic. They could publicize their accreditation, and put an official logo on their website/blog. Basically, this approval process should be similar to the process of being hired at a newspaper. (“Organizing the Bloggers”)

Applying the values and standards of journalistic-criticism is not necessarily without merit; a blogger-critic’s practice can certainly be drawn from this genre. However, the assumption that blog-criticism is an extension of journalistic-criticism obscures the important differences that define the practice and may preclude blog-criticism from finding its own purpose and function as a potentially separate genre. Neither should all blog criticism be defined as word of mouth advertising. Journalistic critic reviews also function as advertising.

Trueman states that “in contemporary criticism, authority is everything” and is built from “both expertise and experience” (“Waiting in the Wings”). Younger critics amass experience by “seeing and engaging with as much theatre in as many diverse forms as possible,” thus accumulating the “10,000 hours supposedly required to achieve expertise” (“Waiting in the Wings”). Riccio calculates that 10,000 hours is roughly equivalent to 5,000 shows and figures at his “exaggerated rate of 200 shows a year” achieving that goal “would still take me 25 years” (“Doin’ What”). Factoring in the time spent writing the review might reduce that number to “2,500 shows (and 12.5 years)” (“Doin’ What”). Riccio adds:

Just this March, I wrote 19 reviews--roughly 10,000 words--and I’m sure I made some mistakes along the way. I understand now why there are editors and first-string critics who attend shows and do not write about them, though it’s a luxury I--without a major publication behind me--do

not have, nor particularly want, considering that I'm seeing these shows to write about them and because I want to. It's really just the time that's a factor. If you take last year, when I reviewed 250 shows--125,000 words--it's more or less the equivalent of writing two works of non-fiction...in my part time. ("Doin' What")

While blogging provides early career critics with a forum for publishing their work, they work mostly without any remuneration, a situation that Trueman feels "reduces young critics to amateur enthusiasts" ("Waiting in the Wings") and makes criticism "no more than a hobby to be fitted around other work" with little time remaining for "broadening one's perspectives by engaging with other art forms and the world beyond – as the true critic must" ("Waiting in the Wings"). Riccio suggests that theaters can address this issue by continuing to organize Bloggers Nights. Noting that Manhattan Theatre Company, MCC Theater, New York Theatre Workshop, and Playwrights Horizons have "all experimented with this, and hopefully they'll continue to do this, especially when premiering work that they write about on their own blogs as being "groundbreaking" ("Doin What"). In Riccio's view this practice would have a trickle down effect, noting that, "individual directors, playwrights, and even actors have sent out blogger invites. Granted, they're often looking for honest coverage of an unpublicized show in a loft somewhere, but there's no reason why that can't help to grow critics, too" ("Doin What"). Aggregator sites would be also useful in helping theaters "figure out which bloggers to contact" (Riccio "Doing What"). Such sites could impose requirements on the number of reviews a blogger needed to post before adding the blogger's feed to the aggregate (Riccio "Doin What").



In 2008, Isaac Butler and Rob Weinhardt-Kent launched the blog, *Critic O'Meter*, a variation of the Variety's *Critic's Tally*. *Critic O'Meter* eventually morphed into *StageGrade*, a blog that compiles and reads "every published review of every show" (StageGrade "How It Works") in New York City. Reviews from blogger-critics are grouped with mainstream media critics and each review is issued a letter grade based on the critic's response. Grades are then used to calculate a median grade "to reveal the critical consensus" (StageGrade "How It Works"). The site has expanded to include community reviews. It is not clear whether there is any requirement for blogger-critics in terms of number of reviews published or how long they have maintained their blog.

Overlooked was the potential for artist-critics to expand the boundaries of the critical conversation. For Fracaro, this genre of criticism functions as an extension of the artist's practice, a vision similar to Eliot's who considered "criticism employed by a trained and skilled writer on his own work" the most vital and highest form of criticism. The critical act becomes part of the creative process, a way of "combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, and testing" the aesthetic boundaries of the work; thus the artist enters into a discourse with the work (Eliot 73 1975). Fracaro extends Eliot's vision outward toward the work of fellow artists and advocates for peer-to-peer critical discourse. He explains:

If an artist has a practice, he has an aesthetic stake to defend or explain or propagandize. His criticism of others' work will necessarily have both the bias and the integrity of this practice as its foundation. He is able to speak from this specific base of aesthetic knowledge— to define and delineate borders between his practice and others'. This kind of criticism creates a venue for an exchange of ideas outside the market, a discourse about the art form itself. ("The Contra-Review")

However there were exceptions. Playwright, James Comtois states that he likes “the idea of writing reviews,” although he admits he might not be “particularly good at it, simply because it’s a new series of skills I’m just now learning to develop” (“Blog Reviewing”). He writes:

The ability to review a work honestly and fairly is a skill I don’t mind having. Some bloggers have an aversion to it and find reviewing to be a conflict of interest. I don’t. I have yet to be convinced that I’ll be pegged not as a playwright but as a critic (or why that would be so awful) or that I’ll hurt my playwriting career. (“Blog Reviewing”)

Matthew Freeman’s response to watching a production of Beckett’s *Happy Days* featuring Fiona Shaw is one example of how this process might look. Freeman notes that in the process of “thinking about how to share my responses, or even if I should, with those that read this blog,” he had discovered “something a little more important to me personally” (“What I’ve Seen”). In examining his own subjectivity in relation to the work he experiences, Freeman acknowledges that he approaches “almost everything I see as a sort of amateur critic or reviewer, even when I am under no obligation to respond with that narrow a lens.” He questions this tendency:

I’m not paid to reduce my emotional responses to something communicable to an audience (even those who read this blog); I’m not arrogant enough to think I am providing critical feedback to other artists who will benefit from my advice; I am not functioning as a consumer advocate. (“What I’ve Seen”)

Freeman explains that his critical approach to work involved a faultfinding or censoring impulse that finds its ne plus ultra in *the pan* review, a category of response that most people associate with journalistic-criticism (London 17). Freeman states that he has “a four star rating system embedded in my brain” and feels “like it’s crippled (in some

ways) my ability to involve myself with what I watch, and worse, explore what I've seen after the fact, when the real exploration takes place" ("What I've Seen"). He then shares the range of his experience of watching the play. He writes:

Cruel, unfair, typical. I'm seeing a portrait of a certain type of marriage, maybe...I'm seeing general [sic] plight in any life...the rituals, the self-restraint, the lack of control, the inner strength that you have no choice but to find...I'm hearing the increasingly painful and, somehow, inspiring humanness of Winnie...I'm pitying her and falling in love with her and I'm laughing at her...I thought about global warming...I thought about Iraq...I thought about my grandmother, and how she died, in her attic. ("What I've Seen")

He observes that in the end "the merits of the approach, the set design" mattered only "insofar as they affect how I was feeling when I watched it" ("What I've Seen"). He explains:

What it gave to me as a piece of art (that is to say, an expression of something true and beautiful, produced to inspire in me feelings that I do not have when I am not watching it) is all that matters in the end. The rest is vanity or "making conversation" or trying to sound expert or imitating the newspapers. ("What I've Seen")

Freeman's response eludes to the notion of an "incommunicable experience in the center of criticism" (Frye 27-28), which through writing, the critic attempts "to transmit and translate to other people" (Kroll qtd. in Neiman Reports 6). In doing so, criticism begins to press "language to the point of fracture" in an effort to "do what writing cannot do: account for experience" (Hickey 67). Hickey claims that by doing "otherwise, you elide the mystery, which is the reason for writing anything at all" (167). Frank Rich acknowledges that conveying his experience of the play to an audience was the primary reward of his practice. He states:

The creative part of the job, the reason I enjoy doing it, is to try to re-create for the reader what it was like to be in the theater and see a particular play. If you do that, you increase the understanding of theatergoers who don't have the inclination or time to devote all their energies to thinking about theater. That's why I feel one test of an effective critic is that he or she can get you excited or interested or driven to go see something based on a negative review. (qtd. in Booth 176)

Freeman's experience reveals a willingness to enter into a dialog with the artwork, to go beyond feedback and consumer advocacy to describe his affective experience ("What I've Seen"). August Schulenburg comments on the post, acknowledging that, "no one should feel an obligation to 'review' everything they see in the traditional format of a review" ("What I've Seen"). Schulenburg believes that "the act of critically engaging with a play you're passionate about is as much an act of love as simply declaring you love it," and "attempting to articulate how a good play works, and communicating those thoughts to others" seems to be "an essential part of growing as an artist" ("What I've Seen"). Thus, Schulenburg notes evaluation becomes "less a question of good vs bad, and more a question of how and why something works" ("What I've Seen").

Croggan calls for critics to eschew the role of a "Godlike representative of the mythically singular "Audience," which she notes is "often the pose of mainstream critics" ("Dying City") and argues in favor of revealing and acknowledging their subjectivity within the critical act. Croggan feels that such a perspective "makes for more interesting responses, for a start" ("Dying City"). Such a process indicates a potential for a less combative blogging practice that could engage "with the artwork, with the artist, and with the public" (Feral 314). By collapsing the critic's authority as the sole interpreter of the

theatrical experience, the blogger-artist-critic could create the possibility of more open-ended exchange. Peter Brook observes that the critic is “part of the whole” and constraints of time or space should be of no concern; of more importance is whether they have “an image of how a theatre could be in” in their “community and are they “revising this image around each experience” they receive (32). For Brook, the “more the critic becomes an insider, the better” (32). Brook explains:

I see nothing but good in a critic plunging into our lives, meeting actors, talking, discussing, watching, intervening. I would welcome his putting his hands on the medium and attempting to work it himself.” (32)

The participants for the Blogger’s Nights events were either bloggers who practiced criticism or emerging artists who participated as a way of supporting fellow artists or as Joshua James – speak out against the NYT. Because of their early career status, bloggers such as Isaac Butler, Matthew Freeman were reluctant to embrace a peer-to-peer critical practice out of concern about the effect it would have on their careers. A practice such as Fracaro proposes requires a sustained level of commitment, engagement, and focus and, at the time of this study, the NYC theater blogosphere was a relatively new phenomenon and in the process of developing. Value was placed on trying to understand the theater blogosphere’s potential and exercise whatever power it could because of its novelty and the attention it had received as a result of Rachel Corrie controversy. Given its location, the New York theater blogosphere was under the microscope of the mainstream media both in New York City and abroad in England. The attention placed on the bloggers by the mainstream media appeared to have a legitimizing

effect on their practice, but at the same time may have distracted the community and altered its development.

### *Areas for Future Research*

Blog-criticism is a fairly new practice and little research exists in this area of study, thus there is opportunity and need for continued scholarly research covering a wide-range of topics. Given that this study was limited to documenting the practice of New York City theater bloggers, a comparative study of the critical practice of blogging communities in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco would be useful in determining where practices intersect, where they diverge, and in what ways critical practice is negotiated within a specific community. Contrasting the practice of critics in Chicago with critics in New York, Fosdick discerns an identifiable role, style and function based on the particularities of the community. Is there an equivalent in the theater blogosphere? Certainly there are shared interests and concerns that are local to a community, which will be reflected in the criticism. Are there distinct styles of interaction and accepted norms within theater blogging communities and how are they negotiated? Additionally, an examination of the practice of blogger-critics on an international scope would further advance the knowledge in the field.

One area for deeper research lies in determining the influence of blogger-critics both quantitatively and qualitatively. First by tracking hit counts and site activity. Then by examining the make-up of the audience who reads and participates in the theater blogosphere as well as determining which form of social media has a greater impact on their choices in cultural activity.

In 1985, Bonnie Marranca asked, “What is it that will make being in the theatre important to us today” (11)? Historically, one of criticism’s tasks has been to continually rediscover its subject in the old and the new and to reaffirm the art form by explaining the critic’s connection to it (Rogoff 140). What Marranca proposed was a larger, more ambitious project, a potentially impossible task; she encouraged writers, critics in particular, to make less distinction between the act of criticism and the act of writing and in the process aspire to “leave new species of writing for those who come after us” (11). Blog-criticism has the potential to offer new ways of writing and thinking about theater. While journalist-critics contend that criticism is a professional practice, questioning the legitimacy and authority of blogger-critics, perhaps research is needed into ways to reframe the project of criticism. An inquiry into community-based Feminist performance criticism may offer insight into how the critical act can be renegotiated along more community-oriented lines. According to Shalson, criticism is “constructed” (223) developing over time and thus becomes “a site where cultural exchange is negotiated, and more importantly as a site that performers, spectators and critics navigate together” (223).

Teachout states that the “emergence of the practitioner-blogger has the highest potential significance for arts journalism” (“Culture”), noting that historically, many of the best critics have been practicing artists. While the practice has been rejected for the most part in New York City, peer-to-peer review is especially prevalent in the Chicago theater community, thus providing another opportunity for further research.

As Riccio, Trueman, and Haydon note, there is no educational program or on the job training program for critics. The downsizing of arts sections and the critic lay-offs

mean that it will be even more difficult for new critics to get training. The role of the critic is changing rapidly. It is no longer possible to make a living at writing for a newspaper. Thus a study that focuses on early career critics and how blogging informs their practice would be useful as well. There are no studies of blog-critics whose practice focuses on the literary and theoretical applications of criticism as well as those who write review-oriented criticism and the long form essay, nor is there any documentation of group blogs that focus on arts reporting and criticism.

Finally, there is a perception that art is not as important to a younger generation, but the culture is in flux and the circumstances for art making and reception are being renegotiated. As Eliot explains:

No generation is interested in Art in quite the same way as any other, each generation, like each individual, brings to the contemplation of art its own categories of appreciation, makes its own demands upon art, and has its own uses for art. (87 1975)

This generational rift expresses itself across a broad spectrum of the culture; certainly further research is needed regarding how this transition is affecting the making of art and the production of entertainment, as well as its dissemination. As audiences and artists use technology to explore new ways of producing and participating in art, it is important to document the practices that are developing in relationship with this movement. Certainly it is necessary to understand how technology connects people and in the ways in which it adds vibrancy their lives. In terms of the question of this study, blogger-critics are redefining the practice of criticism. Further inquiry is needed in order to identify the changing values and aesthetics that are shaping the way a new generation of artists and audiences interact with theater, thus signaling how the role of the critic may be redefined.



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