



## Reviewing

Title	Reviewing
Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
Publication Date	2015-02-12
Publisher	Routledge

## REVIEWING

In 1999, the dramaturg and playwright Jocelyn Clarke was teaching a class on theatre criticism at Trinity College Dublin. Earlier that week, he had brought his students to see a play called *The Salvage Shop* by Jim Nolan – a popular production that was playing in one of Dublin’s commercial venues. The students had written reviews of the show for his class, and their response was largely negative: “they had been dismissive of both the play and the production,” wrote Clarke, “and some [...] had been snide and cruel”.<sup>1</sup>

Clarke had a surprise for the students, however: Nolan was going to visit the class that day to discuss their views on his production. Perhaps surprisingly, Nolan received a positive response, receiving a spontaneous round of applause when he told the group that his ideal critic is “someone who comes to see a production, wanting it to succeed” (95). Suddenly, the students felt embarrassed by their reviews, which they now considered “stupid” and “bad”, according to Clarke (96). They still believed that Nolan’s production and script had problems that needed to be highlighted but, faced with the person who was the object of their cruelty, they now felt an obligation to analyse future productions more fairly, and to avoid being needlessly hurtful. Clarke’s suggestion to his trainee critics was that professional reviewing must not only be well informed and readable: it must also be responsible.

Academics engage in the act (or art?) of reviewing in a variety of ways, many of them relevant to the subject of editing. Theatre scholars occasionally write book reviews; some also review performances. Many review funding bids or applications for promotion, and all are likely to engage in peer review. We are also regularly subjected to review – from published criticism of our creative and academic work, to (usually anonymous) assessments of our publications and funding bids, to schemes like the REF. Reviewing dominates our professional life, both intellectually and materially: a negative review can inhibit the reception of our scholarly ideas, and can have an impact on our ability to develop our careers. In contrast, a constructive review can be enabling, creating new opportunities for research and professional advancement.

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Clarke, “Uncritical Conditions” in Eamonn Jordan (ed), *Theatre Stuff* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), p. 96. Subsequent references included in the text.

Given its centrality to our profession, reviewing receives less attention – and perhaps less care – than it deserves. Guidelines for reviewers vary from one publisher or funding agency to another, if they are issued at all. There is relatively little discussion about appropriate methodologies or good practice. And anecdotal evidence suggests that academic reviews are subject to the same problems that Jocelyn Clarke identified in his classroom: they can too often be harsh, snide, dismissive or uninformed.

Theatre criticism and academic reviewing are certainly different from each other, yet both suffer from an occasional confusion between criticism and cruelty – while in both fields the ideal reviewer could be described as someone who wants the work to succeed. My suggestion, then, is that we can form a better understanding of editorial reviewing for academic purposes by drawing on the comparatively well developed discourse about the function and value of theatre reviewing.

Since 2005, I have edited five collections of essays, two anthologies, and a book series for Methuen Drama. I've also written roughly a hundred play and book reviews, and I acted as Reviews Editor of *Irish Theatre Magazine* for a short time (making me a reviewer of others' reviews). Those experiences persuade me that my responsibility – as both professional reviewer and editor of others' writing – is literally to *re-view* the material under consideration. I use that word in the sense of seeing something again: “re-viewing” as the act of being an article's second reader (the first reader is, of course, the author); “re-viewing” in the sense of analysing the work both objectively (insofar as possible<sup>2</sup>) and in relation to my own responses; and “re-viewing” finally in terms of offering a perspective that might not originally have been visible to the author.

For the editor, communicating those new “views” involves many activities. Editors need to accomplish simple tasks, such as revealing to authors the many typos that become invisible to us when our articles have gone through several drafts. But authors sometimes lose sight of other things too: the thread of an argument, their

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<sup>2</sup> I am mindful of Jill Dolan's warning that objectivity is a “myth” that “masks the biases that any critic [...] brings to his or her work”. By “objectivity”, I am thinking of what Noel Carroll refers to as aesthetic and critical principles that are “inter-subjectively verifiable”: that is, ideas that are rooted in subjective experience but which are capable of being widely agreed upon. Put simply, I mean that the reviewer has an obligation to imagine how a work will be received by “readers in general”, and thus to guard against the kinds of bias Dolan highlights. See Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator in Action* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 5 and Noel Carroll, *On Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 34.

original idea, the overall coherence of what they *wanted* to say and its relationship to what they think they *ought* to say. The editor's role as "second reader" allows the author to form a realistic understanding of how future readers will see the work – and to make changes accordingly.

Theatre critics do something similar: they shift theatre-makers' perceptions from intentions ("what we tried to do") to effects ("what we succeeded in doing"). In thinking about this shift, I am reminded of an email I received in 2009 from an Irish dramatist whose play I'd reviewed. "You see things in my work that I did not know where there," he wrote. "I don't know if I agree with your perspective, but I am very glad to know about it". In making that statement, the dramatist was keeping faith with his authorial intentions, but also displayed a recognition that, once a play is staged, audiences interpret it in their own, often unpredictable, ways. Our dialogue was not about whether my review was "right" or "wrong", but about the extent to which my perspective was *useful* to the playwright, and to other readers of the review such as prospective audience members, theatre historians, and so on.

This is not to suggest that reviewers are exempt from the obligation to be accurate or that their role is to provide dramaturgical advice. It is widely agreed that the primary function of reviewers and editors is to provide quality control, and I consider that a useful first principle to observe. But much depends on reviewers' expectations about the quality of any work. Theatre critics often cite Peter Brook's statement in *The Empty Space* that the role of the reviewer is to "hound[...] out incompetence" – a statement that is often invoked to justify excessively negative notices.<sup>3</sup> I'd argue, however, that if we go to the theatre (or agree to review academic work) with an expectation that we must sniff out others' ineptitude, we will almost certainly fail as reviewers. Brook himself explains why this is the case in a clarification of his own argument:

The critic who no longer enjoys the theatre is obviously a deadly critic, the critic who loves the theatre but is not critically clear what this means is also a deadly critic: the vital critic is the critic who has clearly formulated for himself [sic] what the theatre could be - and who is bold enough to throw this formula into jeopardy each time he participates in a theatrical event. (37)

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 35. Subsequent reference appears in the text.

Reviewers who expect to find incompetence are unlikely to enjoy the play they're seeing, or the article they're reading – and thus cannot judge with an open mind: the “deadly” reviewer is a jaded reviewer. For Brook, the critic's assessment of a work should be carried out against standards that are constructive and open: we should imagine what theatre *could* be (not what it *should* be) and must be prepared to banish our preconceptions when confronted with something radically new. Kenneth Tynan put this idea succinctly when he wrote that “a good drama critic is one who perceives what is happening in the theatre of his [sic] time. A great drama critic also perceives what is not happening”.<sup>4</sup> To review something is not just to see *what it is*, but also to imagine *what it could be*: to judge “what is not happening” in terms of possibility rather than failure.

To review, then, is not to find fault but to find value: we should literally *evaluate* a work, identifying its achievements, explaining what it needs to do differently in order to succeed more fully, and revealing how it rewards the investment of our time and attention. Dryden put it well when he wrote that criticism was instituted as “a Standard of judging well: the chiefest part of which is to observe those Excellencies which should delight a reasonable Reader.”<sup>5</sup> A willingness to imagine what might delight a “reasonable reader” can help a reviewer to avoid both negativity and subjectivity.

Dryden also expressed intolerance for pedantic criticism. It is, he thought, “malicious and unmanly to snarl at the little lapses of a Pen, from which *Virgil* himself stands not exempted” (87). This statement is a reminder that no-one ever sets out to be “incompetent”: professional courtesy is thus both appropriate and necessary. Yet, as Brian Singleton writes elsewhere in this issue, peer reviewers sometimes produce reports that are too hostile to be passed on to authors – and which are therefore useless. My own experience as an editor is similar: I've occasionally found that I've had to edit peer review reports more thoroughly than the original articles themselves.

Similarly, published reviews can occasionally read like attempts to humiliate the author rather than to critique his or her work. Extreme cases of rude behaviour are

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Right and Left* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. viii.

<sup>5</sup> John Dryden, “The Authors Apology for Heroique Poetry” in *Works* Volume 12. Edited by Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 87. Subsequent reference appears in the text.

relatively common, and it's only fair to observe that a hatchet job is more likely to be read than a positive review, so as readers we bear some responsibility for encouraging the production of negative criticism. But subtle examples of bad practice are widespread in published reviewing. As an editor of book reviews, I often received submissions that avoided assessing what a publication had actually achieved, but instead wrote about what the work *ought* to have achieved – again, constructing the argument in terms of failure rather than possibility. Such reviews succeed only in telling us what the reviewer would have done if he or she were writing a book on the same subject – and thus are largely pointless.

Through editing, I also formed a heightened awareness of the overuse of certain words which I now see as comprising a vocabulary of lazy opprobrium. As someone who writes both scholarly work and journalism, I am routinely bemused by the frequency with which academics use the word “journalistic” to criticise bad writing – while journalists then used the word “academic” for the same purpose. Also overused are words such as “problematic”, “unfortunately”, and “surprising”, all of which tend to reveal more about the reviewer's expectations than the author's accomplishments or deficiencies. And I would gladly sign up for a ten-year embargo on anyone using the word “worryingly” in reviews – as in “worryingly, the author fails to take account of X, Y or Z”. No academic or reviewer ever genuinely worries about a bad article or book; what they usually mean when they use this word is that they will never, ever think about that publication again. This mildly judgmental language implicitly asserts the superiority of the reviewer, belying the idea that our work is being reviewed by our peers.

Leaving minor issues of language aside, there could be more consideration of what might constitute good practice in reviewing. Is it necessary or useful for us to articulate whether a review should be primarily descriptive, interpretative or evaluative? How closely should a reviewer read an article of funding bid, and how much evidence should be used to support the reviewer's assertions? What should we do when a review is self-evidently wrong? How can we encourage jaded scholars to step aside? I do not have answers to all of these questions, but would offer some observations that might partially respond to them.

First, I take for granted that any reviewer should support evaluation with evidence. This means, among other things, that academic journals should provide sufficient space for published reviews to provide reasoned discussion. It also means

that peer reviewers should be required to justify their assertions as a matter of course. And funding agencies could do more to provide justifications for evaluators' decisions.

I also have doubts about the value of anonymous peer review: as we have seen with the rise of social media, the disinhibition offered by anonymity does not necessarily result in greater levels of honesty or accuracy. Different methods of peer review are being explored and could be more widely used; one useful example is the 2010 decision by *Shakespeare Quarterly* to open up peer review to web-based commentary.<sup>6</sup> It might also be an interesting experiment to imagine what would happen to our field if we abandoned anonymous reviewing altogether.

Furthermore, just as there are classes on theatre criticism, we might consider dedicating more attention to training young scholars in reviewing, presenting it as a skill that needs to be practised according to professional and aesthetic standards.

Finally, I return to Jim Nolan's "ideal reviewer". Wanting a work to succeed does not mean that we are prevented from identifying deficiencies, oversights, or mistakes. Nor does it oblige us to like what we do not like. But it does require the adoption of an attitude of collegiality: an obligation to behave as if we are peers rather than antagonists. For that reason, whether in professional criticism or academic review, I would propose a straightforward definition of an "ideal reviewer" – one based on what catechists used to call the "golden rule": we should write for others the kind of review that we would wish to receive ourselves. This is a simple and perhaps even simplistic rule – but I wonder if it could be better and more widely observed?

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<sup>6</sup> Discussed in more detail in Patricia Cohen, "Scholars Test Web Alternative to Peer Review" *New York Times* 23 August 2010. [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/arts/24peer.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/arts/24peer.html?_r=0)