

Cultivating Our Garden: Dramaturgy and Criticism with Senior Theatre Patrons

At the end of Voltaire's *Candide*, the characters who have survived cruel and painful misadventures take up the task of cultivating their garden: returning to fundamentals and taking care of themselves and those nearby. While this is the final lesson of a novel excoriating foolish optimism, it has also inspired a soaring contribution to musical theatre in the form of Leonard Bernstein's "Make Our Garden Grow." As we think about the future of theatre, I am most interested in the possibilities of theatre for building and rebuilding community. Who matters to us? How do we take care of them? In the case of many university theatre departments, audiences for the production season consist primarily of college students and local senior citizens. As a dramaturg on faculty at Michigan State University, I attempt to build community by providing opportunities for these audiences to process their critical responses to productions.

Last summer, Gina di Salvo and I organized a session at the annual meeting of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Co-sponsored by the ATHE's Dramaturgy Focus Group and Theory and Criticism Focus Group, "Dramaturgy as Public Criticism" drew on insights from Public Humanities models of educational programming. What is the purpose of criticism? Do we look to critical engagement to confirm our own expertise? Are we trying to analyze an affective or aesthetic response to performance? What kind of affective response do we expect from public criticism as an intellectual discussion?

For the past four years I have been involved with a program that offers patrons a "Behind the Scenes" look at MSU theatre productions. It began at the request of Carol Bryson, a member of our "Friends of Theatre" organization and an East Lansing resident who is active

with the Hannah Community Center's Prime Time program. Prime Time offers classes and other activities geared toward senior citizens in the community. Carol worked with my department chair Kirk Domer to come up with a structure for the Prime Time Scripts Class: participants would attend one class before seeing a production, then another class afterward. Initially, the first class was a lecture by an academic expert from outside the Department of Theatre, but there has been a shift to the preview class being taught by me, the de facto department dramaturg. Lower attendance last year led the group's leaders to re-brand the course as "Behind the Scenes" instead of "Scripts Class" in order to emphasize additional access to the productions rather than intellectual labor. This suggests more of a focus on marketing than critical engagement.

But I think this also raises questions about audience composition in university theatre departments more generally. At Michigan State, our audiences generally consist of college students who are required to attend for courses; family and friends of our undergraduate and graduate students; and local senior citizens. The Scripts Class came in part out of effort to better serve this senior citizen community. Many are retired professionals with some connection to the university: a cardiologist, a retired English professor, a retired Physics professor, and various former academic administrative staff members.

I often teach undergraduate Theatre majors and MFA students how to articulate a critical response, and encourage them to think about how to use a critical response to make artistic choices. In my General Education course, students write academic papers to offer a critical response to an aesthetic experience. I've had debates with my colleagues about how much preparation we should give to help students understand this experience. In the Scripts

Class, it seems to be less about the amount of preparation than about the kind of preparation that is helpful. They tend to need help understanding color-conscious and gender-conscious casting in different ways than my undergraduate students do. But they are much better at asking “Why this play? Why now?” and they especially like to frame these questions in terms of curricular needs within the department.

Some organizers of the Scripts Class seem to define success primarily in terms of the number of people in attendance. Others evaluate the success of each individual session in terms of the quality of discussion. Based on their comments this could mean the energy level of the room, the depth and breadth of topics covered, whether or not everyone present contributes, or how well I perform the role of in-house critic. Most of these patrons’ efforts to define the success of the program suggest that they want critical engagement to help build community, whether this is based on the size of the group or a desire for everyone in the group to feel included and valued.

What is the purpose of dramaturgical programming? Is it customer service? Is it marketing? Is it “good citizenship” for our institution in the community? In reflecting on these questions, I find potential for personal and community growth in the act of sharing our own critical responses and helping audiences to share theirs. While it is laudable to develop new audiences, let’s not forget to look around and tend to the voices of those who are already with us, who are still with us.

Daniel Smith
Pronouns: he/him/his
Date: 26 May 2020