

Helps for Writing a Critique or Review

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Usually a review is written as a newspaper feature article. You should structure your paper to that end. Remember to include WHAT the play is (title), WHO wrote it (playwright, composer, lyricist, etc.), WHO is producing the play (organization), WHERE and WHEN it is being performed and WHEN you saw it, and sometimes WHY (special performance, fundraiser, etc.)

The type of play will color your attitude toward it. Different standards will apply based on not only the play, but also the way in which it is presented. You cannot critique a Shakespearean play with the same criteria as you would a great American musical.

Begin with an outline of how you want to structure the review. If you are a thoughtful critic, you will jot down a few notes on your program or notepad as you watch the play (or at intermission) and *directly after the play* while it is still fresh in your mind, you should at least write an outline, and include those things that you want to emphasize. And TAKE THIS GUIDE WITH YOU!

The first paragraphs should include a brief synopsis of the play, without giving too much away. Don't be a spoiler! This section will set up the body of your review, so make sure that you discuss the plot points that will later illustrate your opinions. Your reader should get a general idea right from the beginning of your review how you felt about this production.

CRITIQUING THE PLAY

The body of your review should first, in some way, discuss the general theme of the production. The questions you must ask yourself here are really about the play, and the choices made by the author(s) (playwright/composer/lyricist etc.).

- ⇒ What did the author(s) try to present to us? Was s/he successful at that intention? Was the play "worth the time?" For example: *"Ibsen's play, though written more than 100 years ago, still holds our interest because it addresses ideas that are universal."* *"Though this production may have missed the mark somewhat, it is important to note that Ibsen's themes of equality and individual worth are still relevant to us today."*
- ⇒ The plot should hold your intense interest. You should find yourself "suspending your disbelief." If you don't, then evaluate why not.
- ⇒ Is the climax convincing? Does the production progress naturally through the skillful writing, or is the dialogue stilted or clumsy?
- ⇒ Have you been emotionally stirred and intellectually satisfied?

Some mention of style should be included as a bridge into the discussion of the acting in the piece. *"Starlet Playhouse's production was a worthy attempt at capturing the essence of Ibsen's play, but at times its overbearing attempt at being 'dreary' actually made the play appear unfinished."*

CRITIQUING THE ACTING

Here is where you begin to introduce the cast members by name. For example, when writing about *A Doll's House*, you might say, *"Susan Actress was wonderful in her portrayal of the flighty, fluttery Nora Helmer."* Remember that you should name and discuss the performances of at least two actors, but a well-written review discusses more than that.

- ⇒ Does the actor possess the physical skill, emotional depth and intellectual ability to transform into the character?
- ⇒ Could you hear him/her?
- ⇒ Is s/he convincing all of the time?
- ⇒ Is his/her work integral to the whole production?

- ⇒ Is the character rooted in organic, natural response? Or is the character forced or “mugged”?
- ⇒ Do you see the actor as a living, breathing character, or as an actor playing a role?
- ⇒ Was the actor cast well? Or did you struggle to see the actor in that character?

CRITIQUING THE PRODUCTION

Now discuss the elements of the production that go beyond the individual performances. The director is the primary creative force behind the production, yet we should see that s/he has also collaborated with his/her creative staff. You should hold the director accountable for good casting, interpretation of the script, and especially the pace of the production.

- ⇒ Did the production move along with the “right feel”? or did it seem slow, or too fast, or limping, or lurching?
- ⇒ Were the stage pictures interesting, dynamic and balanced? Or did they seem contrived, confusing or stagy?
- ⇒ Did s/he create good focus? Or did you have a difficult time seeing the action?
- ⇒ Did you have to struggle to find the meaning of the piece?
- ⇒ Did s/he create the appropriate mood and atmosphere in which the playwright’s message could flourish?
- ⇒ Did you feel that the actors understood the piece, and their respective roles in the production? Or did they seem “left to their own devices”?
- ⇒ Did the production seem cohesive? Or were the performers confused?
- ⇒ Were you led appropriately to the theme or meaning of the production?
- ⇒ Did the director skillfully lead the ensemble? Or was s/he clearly unqualified to direct this production?
- ⇒ Was the production appropriate for its audience? Did it meet acceptable community standards? Or was it vulgar or gratuitous?

CRITIQUING THE TECHNICAL PRODUCTION

The technical aspects should be discussed at length, simply because you are writing this review for your technical theatre class. You should determine the extent to which the technical elements supported or detracted from the overall theme and meaning.

- ⇒ Was the setting convincing? Or contrived? Or just a mess? In what ways?
- ⇒ Did the set “move” appropriately? (Smooth set changes, good flow, appropriate function?)
- ⇒ Was the scenic element simplistic or elaborate? How did that influence the production?
- ⇒ Could you SEE the action? Did the lighting help you to find the focus and the action of the production? Did it complement or distract from the meaning and the action?
- ⇒ How well were the other visual elements presented? Were the costumes effective and appropriate? Were the stage props handled well? Were they functional and convincing?
- ⇒ In what ways might the tech elements have worked to evoke emotion?
- ⇒ Was the staging overall simple, natural and effective?

FINALLY—

How were you moved on a personal level? What did you personally take away from the production? Do you feel somewhat changed? Revitalized? Repulsed? Angered? Moved? WHY?

Talk about what you know, and utilize what you’ve learned in our class discussions. It is appropriate to have strong opinions as long as you have a basis for those opinions.

Critique — *An intelligent and well-thought discussion of the elements of the production, presented in a way that is thought-provoking, enlightening and practical.*

Review — *A writing that is designed to promote the production; a consumer-oriented writing that is recreational to read; opinionated and entertaining.*