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# CHAPTER 18

## HOW TO THINK LIKE A THEATRE CRITIC

*Alison Croggon*

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At first, you mustn't think. You arrive at the place assigned for performance. It may be a theatre, it may be a shed or an underground carpark. You wait for the ritual: the lowering of the lights, the hush in the auditorium, the slight unconscious holding of breath. Something is about to begin.

Even if it's a play that you know backwards because you've read it and seen it in countless interpretations, you have no idea what is about to happen. It will be different every time.

For days or weeks or months or years a group of people has been making whatever it is you are about to see. Theatre comes in many shapes, from many different processes, and is made for many different reasons. However it is done, it will end up in front of an audience. What makes theatre is the work of all those who created it – the performers, the writers, the directors, the designers, the back stage staff – meeting the unknown, which is the audience. The audience is you. They don't know what you think about it. You, ideally, don't know what you think of it either.

You watch and listen and feel. If you are a critic, it is your job to watch as hard as you can. You listen to the language, to the voices that articulate it, and you watch the bodies that move in front of you, weaving meaning out of a relationship and space. You listen to the soundscape that embraces the voices. There may be music, there may be ambient sound, there may be silence so profound you can hear the

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actors breathing and every step on the stage. You look at the shape of the stage, how the set and lighting create their own meanings, how the shapes open and determine the relationship of this performance to you, the audience. You open your body to the rhythms of the performance and the language and the colours and movement that weave their meanings before you. You create a relationship with the work that is occurring in front of you.

At the assigned time the performance ends. It may last for twenty minutes, or for twelve hours. You, the audience, will have experienced that performance in the time allotted. Even if you went back to the same theatre to see the same show, you will never have that experience again. It is now in the past tense, stored in your memory. If you watched hard enough, you will have noticed all sorts of details, which at the moment are mixed up in a generalized mash. In the immediate aftermath, you will have a reaction: you liked it, you hated it, you were indifferent, you were bored, you were so excited or so sad or so astonished that you couldn't speak at all.

None of that matters very much. You are not a critic yet.

You take your memory home and you begin to prod it. You begin to translate your experience into words. When you were in the theatre, you were living in the present tense. That is now over. Now you are a mortician, and language is your scalpel. Now you drag out the books. You may read the play again. You may research some aspect of performance history you don't know enough about. You may need to look up the history of English kings, or dog sledging, or what's going on in garment factories in Bangladesh in 2014. People make theatre about all sorts of things. You remember a quote by a critic writing in 1954. You remember a poem you love that seems apposite. You think about the shapes of everything you saw and you consider how they created the experience that is now living inside you. You let it all circle around your head.

Some experiences are easier to translate into words than others. The hardest are those that affect you most, the shows that possessed you so intensely while you were watching that their finishing is a kind of grief. You know that even if you had all the language in the world, what you write will never be equal to the experience of being there. If

you were angered by the show, if you feel cheated or let down, you consider why. You write down sentences and you test them against what you remember. Is it true? Is it accurate? But always you are returning to the memory, which is the past tense of your present labour.

You will make mistakes. Everybody does. But you try to make as few mistakes as possible. You try to be true to what you experienced in the theatre.

What you write is conditioned by the context in which it will be published. You may have 400 words for a daily paper, or 5,000 for a theatre magazine that is asking you to remember works you saw years before.

It will be a response. You will bring to your response everything that you brought to the theatre: your attention, your knowledge, your experience, your sensibility, your life. You know that the less you bring, the less you'll have to respond with. You don't care about your opinion. Everyone has an opinion. You don't want to be the kind of critic who doesn't pay attention, whose responses are crafted out of their preconceptions or vanity or ignorance. You want to be a critic who thinks with all of their body, in the present and in the past.

You want to be invisible. You write.