

Theatre and Drama Program

Writing Reviews

These notes are intended to assist you in writing reviews of performances you see during the year.

1. **Teaching Purpose**

Like other written work, theatre reviewing will help you develop your understanding of drama and the theatre; in short, to develop your theatre literacy skills. The task of reviewing will make you more responsive to what you see and more comprehensive and exact in your account of it – and this after all is a primary aim of the course. Reviewing, like any other specialised form of writing, is a skill that is only developed with practice; students invariably get better at theatre reviewing the more they do it.

2. **The Function Of Reviews And Reviewers**

Published reviews vary a great deal. The best daily newspapers see the reviewer's job as to report on a more or less important public activity, the importance which – and the space given to that reporting – is often determined by such considerations as the volume of money spent upon the productions reported upon or the perceived status of the production company. Most dailies, however, offer a simpler service (in the form of a brief 'taste test') to the theatre goer who wants to know if the show is worth seeing. In more serious publications, a theatre critic will have a wide-ranging knowledge of drama and the theatre, definite views about what is undesirable or desirable, and a sense of the context in which the reviewed performance is taking place; he or she can take up more inclusive topics, going beyond the performance on the night to a discussion of individual artists and their development, a particular style of production, company policies, theatre finance, theatre in the community – and so on. Sample the reviewers and journals listed below.

3. **The Broad Aims Of Reviewing**

Two points need to be made at the beginning:

Firstly, there is no one review style or structure that suits all purposes (contrary to what many of you will have had drummed into you with the VCE Drama 'CATs'). Different kinds of plays and different kinds of productions naturally lead one to review them in different kinds of ways. **It is important to respond to the particular kind of experience provoked by a performance in a particular kind of way.**

Secondly, reviews are often the raw material of theatre history; long after the play is out of print or its producing company has ceased to exist – and long after a particular kind of fashion has passed – the printed reviews often remain as the only record of a performance. **It is therefore also important to report, as accurately as possible, the basic circumstances of the play, the production and the performance.**

In broad terms, your reviews should

- Evoke (or give an accurate impression of) the performance for someone who has not been there
- Convey a considered personal judgement of the quality of the experience
- Where there is a text which you can be reasonably expected to read, or of which you can form a sufficient impression, consider how the text was interpreted.

4. **Specific Aims**

Here are some questions which you will normally need to consider:

- **What kind of play is it, and what is it about?** It is usually necessary to provide a (very brief) summary of the main action – which does not mean telling the whole story through all its windings.
- **What is the style of performance?** (Eg. Elaborate? Simple? Rough? Naturalistic? A mixture of styles?) As the course progresses your ability to describe style more exactly will grow.
- **What is the nature of the theatre experience?** (Your own responses are crucial, but since theatre is a public event, you should notice how others responded, the atmosphere of the evening, the social context and allied matters. Again, these vary widely.) Remember that the purposes of the theatre are varied and so too are the expectations of audiences.
- **How good is it?** (Be careful to try to distinguish here between the text and the performance. This is sometimes very difficult, and only a rash reviewer condemns a new play (for example) if there is a reason to suspect that the performance has done it less than justice. Cases vary: you sometimes also see brilliant performances of unworthy material.)
- In thinking about any of these four questions you will need to **describe aspects of the performance in detail**. In other words, back up your judgement with evidence from the play and the performance. Some topics you might treat are: acting, direction, design, use of music and dance, special effects; imagery (in word and spectacle), grouping, pace and timing, atmosphere or mood. Remember that these are only examples and not in all cases appropriate. In discussing any of these you should be as precise and evocative as possible.

5. **Presentation**

- Your reviews must be headed by the following information: title, author (and translator if appropriate), director, designer(s), company, and venue.
- Length: about 1,000 words.

6. **Reviewers and Journals**

You may like to read some examples of what professional reviewers do. Among the famous practitioners (in English) were George Bernard Shaw, Max Beerbohm, Kenneth Tynan, Mary McCarthy and Walter Kerr. Reviews of varying quality can be read in the local and national press; the Arts pages in The Australian give about as good a national summary of Australian theatre as we get at the moment, while reviews in Real Time are more diverse.

7. **Assessment**

In assessing reviews, account is taken of your argument and critical response, your theatrical awareness and your presentation and expression. Two points to note: reviews of plays and performances are typically written **in the present tense** and actors, directors etc are not referred to by their first names.