Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Critical Thanking

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 21st, 2018

Susan Loewenberg, the longtime producer of L.A. Theatre Works, interviewed me recently about playwright Neil Simon, whose play, *California Suite*, she was about to focus on for audio distribution. After talking about Simon, the conversation drifted into other territory, including what it's like to be a theatre critic. Since this year marks my 50th year covering theatre, writing about theatre at large, and working for a theatre — The Denver Center for the Performing Arts — the interview also presented an opportunity to share these rambling thoughts with all of you and to thank you for the attention you may have given some of this work during that time.

So on this day before Thanksgiving, I am offering public thanks for what has been a satisfying and rewarding public life, as well as profound gratitude for a mostly very fortunate and happy private one. No, I'm not quite done with it all yet, but I couldn't resist the anniversary and the chance to share it.

I wish you all health, optimism and, above all, joy and contentment.

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Q: What do you think of Neil Simon's place in American theatre?

A: I think of him as a top American writer of intelligent comedies that captured the mood of his contemporaries and forged a commentary on his times. Which is what good comedies do: comment on the immediate. They are not intellectual exercises the way Tom Stoppard's comedies are, but Tom is the exception rather than the rule. So is Shaw (who managed to also comment brilliantly on his times).

Film and television have in large measure usurped Simon's kind of humor. And theatre went on to other things, such as David Ives' brand of humor, which is a bit more sophisticated, Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*, which eludes me but has its rabid champions. And then there is Alan Bennett with his exquisite character studies — and the ever-exceptional Stoppard who writes the most elevated comedies of all. Some of them are even hard to call comedies. *Arcadia*, for instance.

Simon's brand is closer to the French *boulevardier* comedies of the early 20th century – comedies that captured the mood and stereotypes of the society of the moment, with good timing and wit, and ran with them. That's what Simon gave us too. I'd call them difficult to write easy laughs. Absolutely nothing to sneeze at.

Do you think Simon's work has aged well or is it very much of its time?

Of its time, but getting older. Look at the references. Who takes Librium anymore? Carol Burnett and what she did on television outdid and outpaced almost everything else. Those were brilliant skits. Neil Simon's plays are deeply perceptive extended comedy skits. The reason for their success is that he captured his characters' real-life counterparts to perfection. Will his plays last? For a while. but like the French *boulevardiers*, not forever because they are on every level connected to a specific age.

Tell us about your experience with his play *Jake's Women.*

I reviewed *Jake's Women* for the *Los Angeles Times* when it had its world premiere at the Old Globe in San Diego in March 1990, and I had just become chief critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, after my friend, boss and mentor, Dan Sullivan's departure. Neil Simon and producer Emanuel Azenberg were so confident about the play that they'd booked a Broadway house and planned to take *Jake's Women* directly there after San Diego. My son, who was a stage manager at The Old Globe at the time, was getting married in La Jolla at the end of April and had invited a lot of Globe colleagues to attend. But many of them were going to be in New York for *Jake's Women*'s opening and had to pass.

However, the play had problems. Ron Link, who was directing, was let go days before the San Diego opening, and the Globe's Artistic Director, Jack O'Brien, stepped in to the rescue. It couldn't be done. I had give the play the negative review it deserved. Soon after, Simon and Azenberg canceled the Broadway run and all of the Globe's top brass, came to my son's wedding instead.

When I ran into Jack at the reception I said, "I'm so happy to see you here."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world," he replied. When I gingerly pointed out that, well, he might have if *Jake's Women* had opened in New York, he said, "Oh, there's a big fat lie in the middle of that play…" and never finished the sentence.

Two years later, in March 1992, a revamped *Jake's Women* did open on Broadway and I reviewed it. It was a much, much better play. I gave it the good review it deserved. I was still in New York when the review ran on page one of the *LA Times'* Calendar section, above the fold, with a big photo and big headline. It launched a wonderful exchange of letters between Neil Simon and me. He was one of the few playwrights I've come across who accepted the notion that there might be something of value somewhere in the critique and used it.

Do you have a favorite Neil Simon play? A least favorite?

Not really. I enjoyed *Lost In Yonkers* quite a lot. *The Odd Couple*. And the second half of *Broadway Bound*, because of the lovely moments when Eugene, the Neil Simon character, dances with his mother. Very tender.

Let's look at your role as a critic. How did you start?

Like most critics. By accident. They may exist, but I've never met a critic who started out to be a critic. I was trained as an actor and director and I maintain that criticism is directing backwards.

What are some of the productions you've covered in your career that stand out – either for their excellence, or for how terrible they were?

That's what I call a wrong question. It's like asking me if I prefer apples or oranges or watermelon. They're impossible comparisons. What I can say is that the plays I enjoy most are the ones that enlarge my understanding of our fellow human beings who are as imperfect as I am. And that is a very broad canvas.

To have a good time at the theatre, I require a level of intelligence in what I see, a level of skill, both conceptual and in terms of a production's execution. You may do *Hamlet* walking on all fours as long you also can make it touch me. Make me laugh, think, feel or cry deeply. Something I can't shake off. Because what makes me go to the theatre again and again and again is that thirst for the profound emotional instruction I receive.

Katy Sullivan & Felix Solis in *Cost of Living* at The Fountain Theatre. Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

How do you see your role as a theatre critic?

Mmm. As a lover and a mentor and — this will sound terribly pompous but it isn't meant to be — as a kind of guardian of the standards of the art form. For a critic, I'm surprisingly uncritical in my daily life. I let things wash over me. And then I think about them. And depending on how they've made me feel, I make a highly subjective determination about what I've experienced.

Despite whatever else you may have heard about the importance of objectivity, criticism is a highly subjective occupation. I'm a limited fan of wildly experimental stuff because it mostly loses its humanity. It has its devoted fans; I'm not one of them. I've never had an ax to grind, which is *the* basic no-no. The only times I can say I'm angered by a production is when there is an identifiably lazy or sloppy or uncaring approach to the work. Art demands rigor. I watch for competence. And sincerity. There's a chasm between a genuine effort that fails, which is OK, and a failure due to lack of effort. Or just plain ineptitude.

How has the business of theatre criticism changed since you started?

It's been diminished by the proliferation of social media. Instead of leveling the playing field, too many self-appointed critics are merely flattening it. I wrote an article about that for Lee Melville a few years ago when he was editing the LA Theatre Alliance's magazine. For myself, I'll concede

that my fascination with the theatre is a form of addiction. It feeds me. I'm probably more demanding now than I ever was, and perhaps a bit better at finding precision in the language of response. But I also watch out for creeping criticism fatigue. Writer's block can be a killer. I'll add that I am *supercritical* of my own work.

With social media, can a critic's opinion still make or break a show?

I don't think so but, without accounting for how good or bad a critic might be, it depends heavily on the perch — the sphere of influence of the forum the critic is given. I now indulge in writing criticism for selfish reasons. I was about 38 when I began. I do it now more as a demanding dilettante with standards. I pick and choose what I see because I can, and because I firmly believe what Harold Clurman said about the theatre: that the history of the theatre is the history of bad plays. After all these years, I've seen all the bad plays I ever want to see.

When I sit through a run of three or four mediocre productions I think I'm totally crazy to keep doing it. And then, of course, I land on a perfectly splendid staging of a wonderful new piece in some 30-seat hole in the wall — and that's all it takes. I'm hooked again. You know what they say about marriage, that there's nothing worse than a bad marriage and nothing better than a good one. It's the same with the theatre — nothing is more deadening than a bad production and nothing more exhilarating than a good one. Astonish me is still the byword.

l-r, Dan Bucatinsky, Shoniqua Shandai & Jessalyn Gilsig in *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

What did you think of *Hamilton?*

I haven't seen *Hamilton* and I'm in no hurry. So I can't judge it. I have a profound distaste for what its producers did by allowing the rule of stratospheric ticket prices, and the condescending practice of daily lotteries. This applies particularly to any hit that would make shovelfuls of legit money anyway.

Theatre should be liberally shared and priced. It should be accessible to everyone, and not become a manipulated and manipulative greed-fulfillment machine. This awful practice began with *Book of Mormon* and it only encouraged *Hamilton* to pursue the same policy. That's capitalism at its most distorted. When that kind of abuse begins, it signals disease. And disease can lead to death.

Okay… So what are some recent productions you've actually enjoyed?

Tom Morton-Smith's *Oppenheimer* at Rogue Machine, Martyna Majok's *Cost Of Living* at The Fountain. Both are still running, although *Oppenheimer* has only a few more performances. The plays are vastly different, but have key things in common: skill, intelligence, understanding and compassion.

Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone,* which just closed at East-West Players, is very fresh writing, a bit overextended, but so encouraging, so impudent and imaginative. There was a touch of miscasting

at East West, but the Ninja fight scene (Thomas Isao Morinaka and Aaron Aoki were the fight choreographers) and the vivid direction by Jennifer Chang provided insight into a startling script. Eliza Clark's *Quack* at the Kirk Douglas was a smart and intriguing comedy that also has closed. If Center Theatre Group wants to do something useful and good, it should give *Quack* a full run at The Taper.

By and large, the Kirk Douglas offerings I've seen have been more strange than intriguing — and let me quickly say that I've not seen them all, mostly because so many of the ones I did see were disappointing. Selections for the annual so-called Block Party at the Douglas have mostly shown puzzling judgment. Block Party is supposed to be a showcase for the best of small theatre offerings in the L.A. area, but whoever chooses the fare has made confounding selections. I'm being kind.

Alex Alpharaoh in *WET: A DACAmented Journey* at the Atwater Village Theatre in 2017. Photo by Youthana Yuos.

Good productions shouldn't be that hard to spot: skill, intelligence, understanding, compassion. I'm happy to say that some of the most encouraging writing I've seen has been *young* writing: *Vietgone, Cost Of Living, Quack, Oppenheimer* and Alex Alpharaoh's stunning one-man-no-set *WET, a DACAmented Journey*, with its absurdly moving and funny plea for Dreamers and rational immigration stay with me.

The good news is that theatre continues to evolve. Just like us.

Top image: The cast of Oppenheimer at Rogue Machine Theatre in Venice. Photo by John Perrin Flynn who also directed.

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