

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

R.I.P John Simon

Jerry Kavanagh · Wednesday, November 27th, 2019

My friend and former colleague John Simon passed away Sunday night (November 24) at the age of 94. John was a brilliant litterateur, a critic of steadfast standards and ideals, and the smartest, most erudite and well-read man I ever knew.

I first met John in the mid-1970s at *New York* magazine. I was taking classes in late afternoon and early evening at Columbia University for a graduate degree in English and working full time during the day as assistant arts editor at New York. It was a job that paid me to read, which included the critics' essays. I looked forward to those assignments every single day.

My responsibilities at *New York* were to work closely with the Lively Arts department, the magazine's so-called "back of the book." I would have first read, which included fact-checking and line editing, on all the reviews submitted by the magazine's critics: Judith Crist (Film), Simon (Theater), Alan Rich (Classical Music), Thomas B. Hess and later John Ashberry (Art), Gary Giddins (Jazz), Marcia B. Siegel (Dance), and Nik Cohn (Rock). Later on, Molly Haskell and David Denby wrote about film.

During my four-year term, a few of the arts beats changed. I arrived in 1975 as Crist, relieved of her post as film critic, was leaving. My first assignment was to edit her last column: a review of the re-release of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. The following week, Simon moved from covering theater to film. It was a dramatic shift in temperament, tone, and erudition. Crist was less a critic than a long-time reviewer for *New York* and *TV Guide*. She was, let's say, less demanding and more accommodating in general to film—a movie fan—than the acerbic and brilliant Simon, a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard with an uncompromising ferocity for excellence. To be fair, it was John who reminded everyone that Judy pointed out in her review of the film that Krakatoa was west, not east, of Java.

One week after the transition, readers loyal to Crist wrote impassioned letters to editor-in-chief Clay Felker protesting her departure. Simon took great joy in reading aloud some of the more vitriolic objections that arrived in the mail. I remember one missive very clearly, thanks to the exuberant theatrical relish with which Simon read it: "Going from Judith Crist to John Simon is like going from Pollyanna to Martin Bormann."

Later that year, in his review of Howard Zieff's film *Hearts of the West*, Simon wrote, "And then, as Tater, there is Jeff Bridges, clearly the most—or should I say only?—gifted member of the acting Bridges clan, and getting better all the time." Shortly after that appeared in print, the magazine received a handwritten letter from Mrs. Lloyd Bridges in which she defended her

husband and her older son, Beau, and disputed John's assessment of their thespian efforts.

I also remember a separate and more incendiary reaction to another Simon review two years later. *New York* editor-in-chief John Berendt had been brought in by the magazine's publisher at the time, Joe Armstrong, to replace Jim Brady, installed temporarily by new *New York* owner Rupert Murdoch after Murdoch deposed Felker, the magazine's visionary founder and editor, in a hostile takeover. Simon had just appeared on the Stanley Siegal morning TV show in the spring of 1977. When the host asked John what he thought of the new play *The Shadow Box*, by Michael Cristofer, John said it was "a piece of shit." The one-sentence denunciation went out over the airways uncensored.

What an outcry after that! The Broadway League, which represented New York theater owners and producers, was furious. Its principals took this as the final straw in their dealings with Simon, whose often scathing theater reviews they were frustrated by, seeing in Simon an adversary to their promotional and commercial efforts and, ultimately, their bottom line. The League decided from then on to withhold John's opening-night seats. (Each of the city's drama critics always received a pair of opening-night tickets to the latest Broadway productions.) Because I regularly requisitioned those seats for John from each production's PR people, I was involved in the dispute.

Armstrong and Berendt and Murdoch's lawyer, Howard Squadron, naturally were brought in on the case. As I recall, the argument went something like this: The League could not legally withhold Simon's first-night tickets and thus compel him to purchase them while it provided the complimentary tickets to his theater critic colleagues. It was discrimination in that it unfairly denied only Simon access to do his job.

After whatever backstage wrangling took place to restore Simon's seats, Squadron called me to advise me of the settlement and to have me relay the message to Simon that the League, as a symbolic way of showing its disapproval of him, would henceforth hold the seats not in Simon's name but in the magazine's. Squadron then told me parenthetically, "You know, he [Simon] just brings this on himself."

"That's not for you to say," I replied.

I'm still somewhat amazed that the 24-year-old me had the *sang-froid* and the political uncorrectness to say that to him, but in my naiveté I was defending my colleague. And then Squadron started yelling at me. How dare I speak to him like that! Who did I think I was? Did I know who I was talking to...? In his agitated state, he hung up and immediately called Berendt to complain about me. Berendt, somewhat awkwardly, then came down to my desk to offer a half-hearted chastisement. Order was quickly restored, but the incident gave new meaning at the time to the Lively Arts department, and it cemented my fellowship with Simon.

I enjoyed my relationship with all of the critics. Reading their copy and working and collaborating with them daily on the edits was an invaluable supplement to my more formal education. I was being paid (although not handsomely) to read superb critical thinkers, surely the smartest formula for any editor or writer. Before and after work, I was enjoying some of the greatest fiction ever written. Between the required reading for my classes and whatever other literature I had on hand, John would always take note of the novels that accompanied me during my daily commute to and from the office.

I remember some of the titles: *The Old Curiosity Shop* (which edition he reverentially paged

through), *A Hero of Our Time* and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (which he deemed two of the great works of world literature), *Anna Karenina*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Oblomov*, *The Trial*, *The Pastoral Symphony*, and *The Heart of the Matter*. One day he noticed Francois Mauriac's *Le Noeud de Vipères* (*The Vipers' Tangle*) on the side of my desk. "Yes," he noted. "That is the correct [English] translation."

John was never dull, and he took pains to insure that his copy never was. I learned early on from him how playful language could be in the hands of a linguist. John was born in Yugoslavia in 1925 and was fluent in Serbo-Croatian, German, and Hungarian by age 5. He later learned English, French, and Italian. I had my American Heritage dictionary close at hand—and increased my vocabulary—while reading his copy as he hovered nearby. If I chuckled over a passage, John was delighted. "Yes, yes. That was good, wasn't it?" he would say.

He liked wordplay and puns, which oftentimes involved one or more of his learned tongues. John once used the yiddish word "schmatta" in a review only to have a copy editor, unfamiliar with the word, innocently change it in the final version to "schemata," believing that she was rescuing John (who was uncharacteristically unavailable to discuss the decision) from a typo or a misspelling. John had a small fit when he read his review in the magazine. He had the final word, though, writing a correction for the following week's issue and attributing the error in his copy to a "Schmatta Hari" who had infiltrated his work.

John would very neatly write out his first drafts in a tiny longhand on yellow legal pads, editing as he wrote and later transcribing the essay onto a triple-carbon set character by character on a manual typewriter. It was that version that I first read, from which he made additional revisions and corrections.

There were editorial disagreements with John over his physical descriptions of Liza Minnelli, Barbra Streisand, and Sammy Davis Jr. in Simon's original drafts of his reviews of performances by those actors. His fellow critic Charles Thomas Samuels wrote, "Simon shows himself a powerful demolition machine for a culture besieged on all sides."

He had his favorites—in film (Bergman, von Sydow, Bujold, Beresford, Wertmuller, Malick), in theater (Shakespeare, Buchner, Wilson, Shanley), in criticism (Agee, Macdonald, Warshow, Tynan, Samuels), in music (Britten, Janacek, Satie), and in literature (Voltaire, Graves, Wilbur, Auden)—and anyone who read John regularly knew he could be as effusive in his praise as he was devastating in his condemnation. Of Richard Wilbur's translation of Molière's *The School for Wives*, John wrote, "Wilbur makes Molière into as great an English verse playwright as he was a French one."

When John would return to the office after a screening, "Around Town" Editor Ruth Gilbert or I would always ask him, "How was the movie, John?" More often than not, he would wrinkle up his nose and curl his lips in distaste and denounce the film in strong language to describe his revulsion for the plot and/or the performances. Occasionally he would throw a small crumb of praise to the filmmaker and respond in his thick Serbo-Croatian accent, "It was not without merit." To which Ruth would exclaim, "A rave!" Childish? Silly? To be sure, but entertaining nonetheless, and unforgettable.

I left *New York* in 1979 to become editor-in-chief of Conde Nast's Street & Smith's Sports Group. "I never even knew you liked sports that much," said John, an avid tennis fan. We kept in touch

intermittently over the years, chatting over the phone or meeting for lunch in midtown. I reminded him of his comments about my past reading choices, and always asked him for recommended books. Among those he chose were *The Cloister and the Hearth*, a historical novel about Erasmus by Charles Reade; *The Woodlanders*, a Wessex novel by Thomas Hardy; and *Evan Harrington and Diana of the Crossways*, by George Meredith.

When John was fired by *New York* after 37 years, I wrote to him to express my sympathies. He was touched, and responded so warmly that his critics undoubtedly would not have recognized the heartfelt sentiments he expressed in appreciation. I cherish that letter. More recently, that is to say about seven years ago, I accompanied him, at his invitation, to an Off-Broadway production of *New Girl in Town*. We talked about our career paths and families. Some time after that, he called to invite me to another play. But because that date was just two nights before my daughter's wedding, I had to decline. Alas, we never did reschedule.

Rest in peace, John.

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