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What's a Work-in-Progress When Everyone's a Critic?

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, September 15th, 2011

If inviting general audiences into the artistic process now means potentially inviting them to share their feedback with the world does this change how we think about presenting works-in-development for public audiences?

Perhaps I have a skewed perception, but it strikes me that over the past couple decades (at least in the US) arts organizations have increasingly presented half- or nearly-baked works to the public and (in many cases) charged them money for the privilege of seeing this work. For a variety of reasons, we have invited patrons into the process and have sold them on the idea that (1) this will increase their knowledge and understanding of an artform or (2) their presence and feedback will be valuable to the creators.

It is perhaps worth questioning whether we are sincere when we say these things and under what conditions these statements are true.

A related phenomenon: sometimes we haven't invited patrons into the process as much as thrust it upon them. Sometimes works 'in development' are not advertised as such; they are rather deceptively called 'previews' or 'world premieres'. By this I mean (for example) preview periods which producers or artists use to make significant changes to a piece, or works that are essentially being developed in performance at one or more venues on their way to New York (though being sold to audiences as if they were finished).

Recently there has been a good deal of chatter and discussion about the impact of amateur critics or passionate patrons (and recently a professional critic or two) blogging or tweeting reviews or comments on works 'in development' or shows 'in preview'. In general it seems these have been seen by artists and producers as breaches of trust. But given the growing power and influence of consumers, and given that we have welcomed them in and charged them money and promoted the importance of their presence and opinions, is it any wonder that they now want (or feel entitled or even encouraged) to blog about their experiences?…

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