

The Crisis of Criticism, Redux

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Abstract

In February 2020, the manidoons collective requested that reviews for their show *bug* be written only by Indigenous, Black, or critics of Colour (IBPOC), citing both the cultural specificity of the work and the systemic racism embedded in “current colonial reviewing practices” (“Why playwright Yolanda”). While the largely white critical establishment as a whole respected the request, critics displayed varied, often limited, understandings of manidoons’ reasoning. This high-profile incident represents a larger trend in Canadian theatre wherein reviewers, “as gatekeepers for theatre in this country,” intervene in dialogue between IBPOC artists and their intended audiences and circulate misrepresentations of their work and cultures (Nolan 107-108). Yvette Nolan calls these kinds of problematic reviews “bad medicine,” which she locates in the critical reception of theatre made by other ethnically and culturally diverse groups as well.

Bad medicine in Canadian theatre criticism is not new, but the pandemic and concurrent global protests against anti-Black racism have forced theatre critics to pause and take stock of the unsustainable and harmful practices that perpetuate it. This moment of crisis presents an overdue opportunity to re-envision theatre criticism as something that could be “socially engaged, culturally responsive, and inclusive” (Shaffeeullah 35). Our presentation examines how theatre reviews reinforce white, settler critical perspectives. Using our coded data from articles written by IBPOC artists critiquing mainstream theatre criticism and historicizing our findings within the long-running debate about the ‘crisis of criticism,’ we highlight the limits of current models of theatre criticism and their role in perpetuating this ‘crisis.’

The Crisis of Criticism Redux

In December 1994, New York dance critic Arlene Croce wrote a controversial article, "Discussing the Undiscussable," in response to choreographer Bill T. Jones' show, *Still/Here*. Croce's piece, which garnered much public attention, explained her decision to not attend or review (but to subsequently condemn) Jones' show for its incorporation of footage from 'real' people, non-dancers living with cancer and AIDS. Croce's objection lay in the argument that such incorporation placed *Still/Here* decidedly 'beyond criticism' by becoming what she referred to as "victim art."

A few years later, noted art critic Maurice Berger published Croce's piece and a series of essays responding to it in an international edited collection he titled *The Crisis of Criticism*. Berger argued that Croce's essay and the "near cataclysmic" (2) response it generated revealed much "about the perilous state of criticism itself" (3). Here Berger referred to both "questions about the ability of the critic to keep up with radical cultural transitions" (3-4) and the waning relevance of the critic in an era where aesthetic evaluation has become a more collective task, an age where, "[e]veryone fancies him- or herself a critic" (4). *The Crisis of Criticism* was published in 1998, before Web 2.0 and the explosion of the theatre blogosphere in the mid-aughts would bring new meaning to Berger's musings on the shifting landscape of theatre criticism. And yet, as scholars and teachers of theatre criticism, we find ourselves returning to Berger's book because, over two decades after its publication, the issues and questions at its core continue to resurface in public debates about theatre criticism.

For example, the concerns that Berger identified circulated heavily through both the Toronto and international theatre scene in February 2020 when manidoons

collective asked that reviews for the Toronto production of their show *bug* be written only by Indigenous, Black, or critics of Colour (IBPOC), citing both the cultural specificity of the work and the systemic racism embedded in “current colonial reviewing practices” (“Why playwright Yolanda”). Ojibwe/South Asian artist Yolanda Bonnell, the show’s performer and creator, quickly became (though not by her choice) the face of this decision, which sparked a flurry of responses, both on social media and in the mainstream press. While most responses were tamer in tone than Croce’s, they employed similar “crisis” rhetoric: “the whole practice of reviewing plays in the media has been *decimated* over the last several years”, wrote Lynn Slotkin on her blog; Bonnell’s “*provocative* policy comes at a time when theatre criticism has been *disrupted*,” wrote Kelly Nestruck in a *Globe and Mail* op-ed headlined “How should media respond when an artist limits reviews to critics who are Indigenous, black and people of colour?” (our italics). Many seemed to implicitly suggest that Bonnell’s request was part of, or at least was aiding, an ‘attack on criticism’ which over the past several years has seen theatre critics’ jobs cut at major journalistic institutions across Canada. The breadth and international scope of the coverage of manidoons’ request also reinforced that this event was contributing to a ‘crisis.’

The recent international uproar in response to *bug* got us thinking about the contested notion of crisis within the larger history and context of theatre criticism in Canada and the networks of power that sustain it. While the prevailing notion of crisis circulated by the critical establishment in both the *Still/Here* and *bug* examples centres on the waning relevance of the critic’s expertise, an alternative interpretation of the crisis of criticism has existed for just as long but is rarely taken up by critics in their

discussion of this 'crisis'. Artists, in particular artists who are Indigenous, Black and/or people of colour, have long spoken about the gatekeeping of reviewers and other problems with mainstream criticism. Rather than framing the crisis as one of the undervaluing of expertise, this interpretation highlights the harm caused when the critic's (presumed) expertise is privileged even when it is not suited to the work under review. Yvette Nolan calls these kinds of problematic reviews "bad medicine," and observes that they can create barriers to artists seeking to enter into dialogue with their audiences. Focusing on how IBPOC artists and scholars have articulated the crisis of criticism, our presentation will examine how current reviewing practices reinforce white, settler perspectives by refusing to engage with work on its own terms. We argue that this act of critical disengagement, often unconscious, is a reaction to a perceived threat to the critic's expertise, which is fundamental to the traditional, individualistic framework of criticism. Beginning by historicizing our concept of critical disengagement through the Croce example, we then turn to a recent qualitative study we conducted to highlight what IBPOC artists' critiques can tell us about this 'crisis' and existing models of theatre criticism.

Critical disengagement manifests in its most extreme form in Arlene Croce's response to *Still/Here*, wherein Croce refused to attend and review Jones' piece but still insisted on writing about it in a lengthy article, published in *The New Yorker*. Near the beginning of her non-review, Croce explains,

A critic has three options: (1) to see and review; (2) to see and not review; (3) not to see. A fourth option--to write about what one has not seen--becomes possible on strange occasions like 'Still/Here,'

from which one feels excluded by reason of its express intentions,
which are unintelligible as theater. (16).

By choosing the fourth option, Croce refuses to engage with the work on its own terms-- as a piece that blurs the lines between dance and performance art (by incorporating the accounts, via video, of those living with cancer and AIDS)--and instead centres herself, telling us more about her artistic values than the work she has not seen. Using as her counterexample Romantic art, whose morbidity is “bearable because it has a spiritual dimension” (25), Croce disparages what she describes as the “utilitarian” approach of Jones’ victim art, which is undiscussable “not only because we feel sorry for the victim but because we are cowed by the art” (28).

Instructive to our argument here is Croce’s understanding of the role of the critic. Early on in the article, she hints at the history of her acrimonious relationship with Jones, complaining that when she “blasted” an earlier work using the phrase “fever swamps,” Jones “retaliated” by using it as the title of a subsequent piece (21). She argues that Jones’ work became “accusatory, violent,” and that it “declared war on critics, the most vocal portion of the audience” (22). Croce’s narrative reveals two key aspects of her understanding of her role as critic and her relationship with artists and audiences. (1) To Croce, criticism is not a dialogue with artists, a relationship operating horizontally wherein artists might speak back (in Jones’ case, through another work of art), but a verdict delivered from on high, a vertical relationship of power. (2) The critic, as the most “vocal portion of the audience,” is not a regular audience member, but a mediator who, through their elevated position, translates the work of art for the public. She returns to this point in her conclusion, lamenting the critic’s unprecedented

expendability due to the growing popularity of “victim art”, a form of low art that can be accessed by the audience without the intervention of a critic. Croce’s understanding of her role as critic is predicated on her imagined expertise (and the audience’s lack thereof); “Discussing the Undiscussable” is a reaction to the threat to her expertise posed by a work of art that does not meet her standards for theatre (it does not even qualify as such) and that in its accessibility negates the value of that expertise. She is “cowed by the art.”

The *bug* controversy and the renewed crisis of criticism it invoked led us to a qualitative study of IBPOC artists’ and scholars’ conceptions of mainstream criticism and particularly, their articulations of its failures. In doing so, we hoped to get a better look at the nature of this current critical ‘crisis’ and whether and how it has evolved since Croce’s time and the publication of Berger’s book. Indeed, one key way that it has evolved is that artists can now share their thoughts on this crisis with a broader public: whereas Jones embedded his response to Croce in his work itself, the internet has provided a forum wherein artists can speak back to their critics. Turning our attention to this forum, we analyzed 26 pieces written by IBPOC artists and scholars in the US and Canada between the years 2011 to 2020, including academic articles, social media and blog posts, and mainstream media pieces. These pieces mainly addressed theatre and dance, though a couple also touched on film. Our research team then coded the articles, looking for patterns that might help to define how mainstream theatre reviews and reviewers reinforce white, settler critical perspectives. These include observations about critics’ approaches to artistic work, and about how critics envision themselves and their roles in the theatrical process.

Our content analysis reveals the widespread prevalence of critical disengagement in mainstream criticism and the multiple ways through which it occurs. While, as noted earlier, Croce's piece demonstrates critical disengagement taken to the extreme as she literally did not see the work she was meant to review, our coding revealed that critical disengagement also occurs when critics *have* seen the work under discussion, when reviewers lack the necessary skills or knowledge to assess a piece of theatre. In our study, we labeled this 'critical incompetency,' a category which included the subcategories cultural incompetency (not understanding key facets of cultural context(s) that inform an artistic work), artistic incompetency (unfamiliarity with various artistic bodies or work, or traditions) and just plain insensitivity. By looking at what artists have said and have been saying for decades, it reveals what the 'crisis' of criticism is actually about: power.

The first major manifestation of critical disengagement is connected to a group of codes that include homogenizing, stereotyping, and othering. These were acts applied by critics to characters in a play or the artists who created them. For example, Marjorie Chan recounts in a blog post that one critic compared Cahoots Theatre's production of Kawa Ada's *The Wanderers* to Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience*. Chan notes that the pieces are, "Different styles, different modes, different intentions, different time periods and born of different cultures," finding the only connection between the two to be that they are plays by authors of colour. This code group speaks to the flattening and binarizing work of a critical establishment that continues to divide plays into "white" and "other". Another example observed of such gross reductionism was the tendency for critics to refer to plays' creators who are not white with food-related labels, such as

referring to the works of Latinx theatremakers as 'spicy'. These codes demonstrate the impact of structural racism, whereby critics make reductive associations which hinder their ability to engage with the work in front of them on its own terms. In other words, without the cultural competency required to engage with the work under review, the critic resorts to racist shorthand.

Critical disengagement also manifests through the common act of reviewers falsely imposing either their own worldviews or Western artistic standards on whatever they were watching. This is what Jason Woodman Simmonds describes in his discussion of the critical reactions to Yvette Nolan's *Death of a Chief*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Simmonds says, "theatre critics take their particular experiences in the theatre world as a body of knowledge that extends magically in the form of an opinion about what constitutes authentic Shakespearean performance and impose their opinion onto the experiences of [Native Earth Performing Art's] self-fashioned community" (187). This is also what Croce is doing when she argues that Jones' use of real people in *Still/Here* cannot be art. Once again, this is an example of how critics let their expectations and lack of competence in certain areas, here more a project of Eurocentric theatrical norms, cloud their ability to engage with the works in front of them.

Beyond the act of reductive comparisons, imposing worldviews and artistic standards on the pieces they review, critics also project themselves *into* the pieces. This is a form of disengagement because the review then becomes more about the critic than it does about the artwork. Under this larger category fall the introspective act of self-indulgence, in which critics centre their own importance in their critical writing over

the works they review, and the outward-facing act of self-protectiveness, in which critics respond to artworks as though they posed a threat to them. A key example of this self-protective act is playwright Antoinette Nwandu's description of the critical response to her play *Pass Over* as "'not-all-white-people' side-stepping"; a "crash course in the myriad ways people who feel implicated by a play's message attempt to dodge that bullet" There is some key evidence in Croce's own piece that speaks to a similar act. In his essay in *The Crisis of Criticism*, Homi Bhabha wryly observes that, "[d]espite Croce's plea for critical disinterestedness, there is no mistaking the interests of her argument" (45). Indeed, as our discussion above has shown, Croce's piece, like reactionary right-wing rhetoric about 'culture wars', positions Jones' dance piece as an antagonist staging an attack against critics (or perhaps more to the point, an attack against her) in a clearly defensive move.

Just as is the case in the original and recently revived 'culture wars,' what Croce's piece, the discussion around *bug*, and the results of our coding reveal is the ways in which anxieties about power and authority resonate through and shape these critical 'crises'. Croce's ultimate objection to Jones' piece was that it placed itself 'beyond criticism'; the object of concern being ultimately not its merit or categorization as an artwork, but its escape from her sphere of influence. This concern about power is verified in Croce's reaction; that rather than simply ignoring the show, she chose to write an article objecting to it and telling audiences not to go. What is ultimately at stake in this 'crisis' is the authority and power of the critic. History shows us that the keening over, in Berger's words, "the diminishing role of the informed critic in the evaluative process" (7) is often loudest when those with less power--artists or reviewers whose

identities do not match those of the homogenous establishment--pose a perceived threat to the critic's authority or the evaluative process itself; a common parallel between the *Still/Here* and *bug* situations. One has to wonder whether Croce's response might have been different were Jones not Black, gay, and HIV positive, identities which Croce relies on in labelling Jones a 'victim' artist. Our qualitative study revealed the impact of generalized structural racism on reviewing, which plays a key role in influencing individual reviewers' pieces; for example, racist assumptions about the work certain kinds of artists might produce. However it also suggested larger problems within dominant reviewing practices which further this racism—particularly, the predominance of certain evaluative criteria grounded in Eurocentric ideals, and a failure of reviewers to appropriately assess the limits of their expertise. These problems suggest that critical disengagement is a product of the current critical and larger socio political climate.

In the case of the manidoons collective's *bug*, critical disengagement manifested in a subtle manner, and came for the most part not through reviews, but through how critics responded to the boundaries manidoons delineated. While the largely white critical establishment as a whole respected manidoons' request, critics displayed varied, often limited, understandings the reasoning and the context (both recent and historical) of the appeal. They chose to focus more on how manidoons' request impacted them and prevailing critical norms, instead of taking advantage of the moment to critically examine the structural problems of racism in criticism that the request was clearly meant to highlight. For example, in the opening of his piece on the topic, Kelly Nestruck posed the question, "should artists be allowed to choose which colour of critic reviews

them?”, reflecting a greater interest in who was not invited than why the request was made.

So what really is the crisis of criticism? A crisis -- “a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything; a turning-point” (OED) -- assumes a sense of urgency, a climax, and imminent change. And yet, the recurrence of these motifs across time, grounded in this paper in two incidents 25 years apart, undermines the novelty suggested by this rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, artists like Yvette Nolan have long pointed out trends whereby reviewers, “as gatekeepers for theatre in this country,” intervene in dialogue between IBPOC artists and their intended audiences and circulate misrepresentations of their work and cultures (Nolan 107-108). These patterns continue to persist because the traditional model of criticism depends on the evaluative power of the critic, a power that is also inextricably wrapped up in the institutional structures of theatre in Canada and its colonial foundations. To offer a brief example, Canadian arts policy continues to respond to the impact of the seminal 1949 Massey Report [correction: 1949 was the year the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Science was appointed. Its report (the Massey report was published in 1951], which was formed at least partially in the interests of founder Vincent Massey to protect and establish the supremacy of a white, Anglophile Canadian culture. Alan Filewod has noted that for Massey, “nation, drama, and race were inseparable” (39).

When discussing the crisis of criticism, critics tend to ignore this important context but rather take for granted that the current practices of criticism are ideologically neutral and inherently valuable. They tend to reframe statements like manidoons’ into discussions about whether something falls under the critic’s reviewing domain (is it

theatre? Is it beyond criticism') rather than critically reflecting on these practices themselves. In ignoring the importance of criticism's larger, structural context, critics also overlook Robert Wallace's valuable observation, that "what is at stake in any process of arts adjudication is power" (129), and continue to uphold the colonial status quo.

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