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The quality of television dramatic criticism

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THE QUALITY OF TELEVISION DRAMATIC CRITICISM

A Thesis
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of the Requirements for
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by
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PREFACE

Through television, mass audiences see more drama more often than ever before. These plays are reviewed daily in newspapers all over the country. The purpose of this study is to inquire into the quality of these reviews, to see whether their quality justifies their existence, and to see what measures could be taken to bring not just reviews but criticism, daily, to the public.

To make a judgment on the quality of television dramatic criticism, it will be necessary to look at the subject of criticism as an entity, next at theatre criticism, and then at television drama criticism to see what we can reasonably expect from each. The thesis will consist of four chapters and a conclusion. The first, a brief history of criticism, will provide a background and perspective in which to place television criticism.

Our purpose in first examining general critical theory is to show the scope and nature of the problems which have faced critics from Aristotle to the present. The emphasis will be not on the problems themselves but on the critical

processes and methods used in examining them.

In Chapter Two, we will explore theatre criticism because it is a major forerunner of television dramatic criticism and because its practitioners suffer from some of the problems which affect television critics.

Chapter Three will be an examination of television criticism in itself and as it departs from literary and dramatic criticism. We will make general observations on the quality of television criticism, and discuss some of the causes for high or low quality in television criticism.

Finally, in Chapter Four, we will elaborate on these general observations by examining the quality of specific criticisms. Our judgments will be based on the criteria we have evolved in the preceding chapters and will be supported wherever possible by comparisons with literary and dramatic criticisms on the same subject.

This study is justified by the simple fact that the public is exposed to such a wealth of television drama and to so many separate criticisms of television plays. While many scattered critiques on the quality of television criticism can be found, no synthesizing study is at present available. Even the Fund for the Republic report on the relationship between the critic and the television industry, a report

which might have contributed to a synthesis of arguments on the quality of television criticism, has been abandoned, at least for the present. This thesis may be able to fill some of the gaps until such a report is again supported.

Though many sources were helpful, the writer wishes to recommend especially Walter Jackson Bate's Criticism: The Major Texts, a rich and orderly book which suggested the structuring for Chapter One of this thesis, and George Bernard Shaw's Advice to a Young Critic, compiled by E. J. West, a lively collection which supported and clarified the ideas expressed by other critics and by the writer.

The writer wishes particularly to thank Sister Marie of the Trinity, of Emmanuel College, for her energetic and demanding course in criticism, a course which provided the inspiration and background for this investigation. For their advice and counsel, the writer thanks Dr. Hugh Gillis, Chairman of the Communications Division of the School of Public Relations and Communications at Boston University, and Dr. Murray Yaeger, who worked with the writer in the initial stages of the thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	iii
Chapter	
I. A HISTORY OF CRITICISM	1
Classical Antiquity	
The Renaissance	
Humanism	
Romanticism	
The New Criticism	
Summary	
II. PROBLEMS IN THEATRE CRITICISM	28
The Problem	
Approaches to the Problem	
Broad Aims in the Practice of Criticism	
The Critic's Training and Discipline	
The Critic's Problem	
III. TELEVISION DRAMA AND THE TELEVISION CRITIC	52
Problems of the Playwright	
Problems of the Director	
The Critic's Role	
The Scope of the Critic's Jurisdiction	
IV. TELEVISION CRITICISMS	73
Reviewing Adaptations from the Theatre	
Reviewing Adaptations from the Narrative	
Reviewing Original Dramas	
The Memorable Review	
V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	113
Recommendations	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	123

CHAPTER I

A HISTORY OF CRITICISM

What is criticism? Understanding what criticism is requires a knowledge of what its history has been. Let us begin with the definitions current today. By the time we have looked at the changing face of criticism during its long life, we will be better equipped to accept or to modify these.

The functional definitions may be most useful to us as an introduction.

T. S. Eliot defines criticism as "a commentation and exposition of works of art via written words."¹ "Commentation" implies that the critic's reaction may be voiced, along with his ideas on the work, while "exposition" implies a rational explanation of what the work is saying -- of the facts of the work. For Eliot, interpretation is really "putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed."² According to his theory, the critic

¹T. S. Eliot, "The Function of the Critic," Selected Essays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 13.

²Ibid., p. 20.

needs "a highly developed sense of fact"³ or some logical basis for his criticism.

Yvor Winters defines criticism as a process which should include a statement of such historical and biographical knowledge as may be necessary in order to understand the mind and method of the artist; certain analyses of literary theories; a rational critique of the meaning of the work, the feeling it motivates, and details of style.⁴ This definition, though more detailed than Eliot's, again includes an appreciation of emotion along with the warning that a factual, rational element must exist in the criticism, while at the same time it adds considerations outside the work.

J. Craig La Driere, too, includes outside considerations when he states that criticism should bring to bear on analyses of art every item of relevant knowledge.⁵ He considers criticism as evaluation based on a description of the work. It is a judgment based on a statement of the structure of the work of art. "The complete critical

³Ibid., p. 19.

⁴Yvor Winters, "Preliminary Problems," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, ed. R. W. Stallman (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p. 209.

⁵J. Craig La Driere, "Scientific Method," Dictionary of World Literature, ed. Joseph T. Shipley (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1953), p. 366.

process is usually not a separate recapitulation of the normal process of reading, but simply an expansion and deepening of it by addition of concurrent cognitive acts, so that when the final evaluation emerges its critique is provided with it."⁶ Further, criticism includes the process of re-evaluating previous evaluations, our own, and those of others.

Winters summarizes the critical attitudes of all three when he advocates the careful development of a process as a means to approaching objective right judgment -- or an ultimate possibility. He recommends re-evaluation of the parts of the process in order to "limit as narrowly as possible the region in which the final unique act evaluation is to occur."⁷

On the other hand, there are the Romantic critics, thoroughly opposed to the declaration of an objective right judgment. For them, objectivity implies an ultimate dogmatism; a rigid, scientific approach in which emotion is ignored. For Joel Spingarn, following Santayana, "Criticism is essentially an expression of taste, or that faculty of imaginative sympathy by which the reader or spectator is able

⁶Ibid., p. 365.

⁷Winters, op. cit., p. 209.

to relive the vision created by the artist."⁸ Much of modern "popular" criticism follows this line.

We have, therefore, on the one hand a cognitive criticism, allowing for personal taste or intuitive response, but demanding a rational basis for judgment; and on the other side, a volitional system, holding as paramount the feelings of the critic atune with the feeling which prompted the artist to create. In seeing this distinction, we see the chief problem of art and criticism -- objectivity opposing subjectivity; Classicism opposing Romanticism -- just as in philosophy Platonism opposed Sophistry. Underlying this distinction is the basic subject matter of art -- and of criticism -- reality. For the history of criticism is only a history of how reality represented in art has been variously seen and judged.

Classical Antiquity

Aristotle was the first serious literary critic who built an ordered system of criticism. It was based on his typically Greek hypothesis that man lived in an ordered and harmonious universe. Though history has disagreed with some

⁸Joel Spingarn, "Criticism in the United States," Criticism in America, ed. Irving Babbitt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), p. 29.

of Aristotle's individual judgments, it generally concedes that his process or method of literary criticism is the most logical and orderly in the field. Aristotle's Poetics, a series of lectures to his students in the Peripatetic School, is the bible of classicism, and has been either the model or the nemesis for later criticism, for it introduces or suggests most of the questions of critical criteria which have since been discussed. The work is actually a descriptive exposition of the elements of the best tragedy of Aristotle's day. With the perfection of his method, he could scarcely have failed as a critic, since he took as his subject matter the works of Homer and Aeschylus, the greatest writers known in his time. From his observations of drama he drew up this definition of tragedy, and spent the remainder of his lectures analyzing it:

Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these and similar emotions.⁹

In accord with his scientific process, he describes first, what is or that which exists in good drama, and secondly, its effect, catharsis or the purging of the emotions.

⁹Aristotle, Poetics, ii, 2, Criticism: The Major Texts, ed. Walter Jackson Bate (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 22.

From what he observes, he makes specific statements as to which elements comprise the best drama of his day; he proceeds in an orderly way, from the essential to the accidental, from the framework to the details which support and embellish it. He calls plot and character the two sources from which action springs, naming plot as the "soul of tragedy" and giving character the second place. As drama has changed this rule has changed, though plot and character are irrevocably related.

He describes the unified structure of tragedy as having a beginning, middle, and end, and lists the six parts of the tragedy of his time as plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. He describes reversal and recognition, what they are, their kinds, and what they accomplish. He shows how selectivity, simplicity, credibility, consistency, unity of action, complication and denouement, elevated language, and artistic decorum contribute to great tragedy. Much of this description still applies, though modern critics may use other names. But Aristotle's chief criterion is that "tragedy is an imitation of an action," just as for him, "art is an imitation of nature."

All of the subsequent arguments about these qualities which Aristotle described have rested on the interpretation of

that phrase, "imitation of nature." A thesis writer recently implied that a great deal of time had been wasted on discussion of this phrase,¹⁰ but this phrase is important because it concerns that core problem -- reality.

Walter Jackson Bate explains Aristotle's definition in terms of the objectivity-subjectivity problem:

In judging an imitation of something, the first and last consideration is the success with which the imitation is able to duplicate what is most essential and important in its original model. Hence, art should seek to be objective.¹¹

In other words, the artist should concern himself with the work of art and represent it most nearly as it is seen, through the medium of his perception. He is not concerned with his reactions themselves. Yet as Bate explains, Aristotle knew that the artist's feelings would necessarily enter into the work of art, but

to admit this is different from urging his aim, his ideal should be to express those reactions and feelings. Rather the aim is to descry the total character, meaning and form of his model, and to imitate it with truth and vitality. He can achieve this aim only by using his reactions and, in fact, every form of awareness he has, as fully and vividly as possible.¹²

¹⁰Peter Whilelam, The Critic in the Mass Media, Master's Thesis, Boston University, 1955, p. 17.

¹¹Walter Jackson Bate (ed.), Criticism: The Major Texts, op. cit., p. 3.

¹²Ibid.

Practicing what he preached, Aristotle accurately described the structure of the work, and using also his reactions and his observations of audience reactions, he described what he considered to be the criteria, the qualities which made drama great.

Aristotle made it clear that imitation was not a direct copy, but a re-presentation, a creating again, of the essential appearance of the model whose reality the artist heightened through his understanding and his artistic ability. This imitation was not the detail-centered realism that we find, for example, in the avant-garde literature of France, because it focused not on the particular but on the ordered and permanent. What was essential in the model was translated into the art by means appropriate to the medium, and became a new thing to be judged on the one hand as it approximated the model, and on the other as it had perfections in itself.

The Greeks defined art as psychagogia, a leading out of the soul. Inherent in this definition is the Greek sensitivity to feeling as well as fact. As long as we remember this, and as long as we keep in mind that Aristotle's treatise was descriptive, not prescriptive, we will recognize as false the modern assumption that Classicism was cerebral and rigid.

Three centuries after Aristotle, the Roman, Horace,

wrote Art of Poetry in the form of a letter to a father and two sons of a prominent family, telling them what an aspiring writer should do. This casually disordered, urbane, and graceful epistle recommends many of the criteria which Aristotle had listed, but Horace's attention centers mainly on the effect of poetry rather than on the nature of poetry itself. In intent the work is partly romantic; in execution it is dogmatic enough to lay down as rules many of the observations of Aristotle.

Longinus, a critic of the first century A. D., whose real identity is contested, wrote a treatise On the Sublime which was concerned with emotion, with the greatness of soul the artist ought to possess, and with the "transport" that art should effect on the audience. In this he seemed romantic, yet one of his primary rules was: Genius needs rules.¹³

He recommended not only imitation of nature, but imitation of the great artists of history. In principle, Aristotle would not have accepted this because it advocates a representation of another representation, not of nature. Longinus, like other classical critics after Aristotle,

¹³Longinus, On the Sublime, ii, 2, trans. A. O. Prickard (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1906), p. 4.

tended to embellish and extend, as rules, the observations of Aristotle.

The Renaissance

After a period of relative indifference to criticism during the Middle Ages, critical discussions arose again in the seventeenth century in Europe. The specific discussions by Sidney, Daniel, Jonson, and Corneille concerned chiefly language (Latin versus the vernacular; prose versus rhyme) and literature (the unities; which habits make a great writer). But the theory upon which critical discussions rested was a distorted re-assertion of Classicism. This Neo-Classicism was characterized by a fundamental error in the Renaissance interpretations of classicism -- the interpretation of the role of morality in art. Art as psychagogia, the leading out of the soul, became for the Neo-Classicalists art the moral builder, with a duty to form the moral character of the audience. What Aristotle had used as an argument against Plato's charge that art had a destructive effect on the morals of the audience, the Neo-Classicalists used to argue that art must be an active moral force. This distortion was durable, finding a voice centuries later in Matthew Arnold and continuing even now in the attitude that art can replace

religion. This is one concept against which T. S. Eliot and other New Critics are continually arguing.¹⁴

Neo-Classicists looked for artistic criteria in classical theory rather than in observing art itself as Aristotle would have suggested. During this period, Aristotle's unity of action was expanded by Cinthio and Castelvetro to include strict unities of time, place, and action, which Corneille expounded in his Discourse on the Three Unities. What Aristotle had observed as artistic decorum, the Neo-Classicists rediscovered as rules of moral decorum or propriety. This, too, the Victorians carried forward not only as rules of literature but of life.

Later Henry James expressed a sane view on this subject when he said, "There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer."¹⁵

The observations and suggestions of Aristotle, the

¹⁴T. S. Eliot, "The Modern Mind," Criticism; The Major Texts, op. cit., pp. 538-45.

¹⁵Henry James, quoted in William Van O'Connor, An Age of Criticism: 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1952), p. 72.

directions of Horace and Longinus became law, in direct opposition to "the tentative and experimental practice of Aristotle."¹⁶ Irving Babbitt says on this subject: "We have done with all the old rules. . . . We find few arbitrary rules in Aristotle, who limited himself to empirical inductions from the experience of art."¹⁷

Neo-Classicists placed their faith in the ultimate ability of

. . . reason, method and system to reach final and conclusive answers. For the most extreme period of European rationalism is to be found, not in Greece, not during the period when medieval Scholastic philosophy flourished, but in the late renaissance, reaching its peak in the flowering of mathematics in the seventeenth century and in the great rationalistic systems of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz.¹⁸

Humanism

With the great interest in the psychology of art in the late seventeenth century there came a relaxing of Neo-Classical formalism. Horace became a model for his sophistication, grace, and casual common sense. Dryden, Johnson, and Reynolds, according to Bate, avoided exclusive confidence in

¹⁶Bate, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁷Irving Babbitt (ed.), Criticism in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), p. 37.

¹⁸Bate, loc. cit.

rules and method, but included the ideals of refinement, correctness, and good sense, taking individual reactions and emotional appeal for granted as necessary and desirable but not as ends to be pursued for their own sake.

It seems then that the return to flexibility included the best of Aristotle and the best of the other classicists, while it was enriched by the new body of English literature that had grown up in the intervening ages.

Excessive methodology, like most things excessive, had fallen out of favor. As Bate says: "Neo-Classicism may be said to have argued itself out of existence,"¹⁹ to be replaced by the cosmopolitan outlook characteristic of Dr. Johnson, and reminiscent of the open-minded concern for essentials that characterized the early Classical tradition.

Between this period of Humanism and the great revolution of Romanticism fell a period of indecision. The empirical philosophy of Locke and Hume had cast doubt on the ability of the mind to ascertain truth. Only the senses were reliable; without the ability to abstract, man could not draw general conclusions from the particular experiences he had. The acceptance of any broad theoretical system became impossible; instead, a variety of critical aims and theories

¹⁹Ibid.

came into vogue. Criticisms could no longer be simple. If reason were unreliable, definitions were impossible. What was nature now? What was an imitation?

On the one hand the reaction against Neo-Classicism had wrought a strong faith in individual feeling as the criterion of taste. This was the period just awakening to the "noble savage." Conscious sentimentality developed which encouraged an emphasis on spontaneity, immediacy, and originality in art. From the new belief in originality came a faith in genius, and came too the romantic idea that imaginative art was natural, while rational art was artificial and contrived. The idea that imagination and reason are mutually exclusive is an error on which much of today's critical bickering is based. Eliot raps it soundly in his essay "The Perfect Critic":

I believe it is always opportune to call attention to the torpid superstition that appreciation is one thing, and "intellectual" criticism something else. Appreciation in popular psychology is one faculty, and criticism another, an arid cleverness building theoretical scaffolds upon one's own perceptions or those of others. On the contrary, the true generalization is not something superimposed upon an accumulation of perceptions; the perceptions do not, in a really appreciative mind accumulate as a mass, but form themselves as a structure; and criticism is the statement in language of this structure; it is a development of sensibility. . . . The bad criticism on the other hand, is that which is nothing but

an expression of emotion.²⁰

But in this in-between time there could be no house of intellect, no rational foundation for such a structure.

Bate sums up the indecisive period in one succinct paragraph:

After Hume . . . not only were objective forms and principles now questioned, but even the validity of human reason itself. Can we indeed know any reality at all except our own subjective feelings -- feelings that may very well not correspond in any way to outside reality? The history of philosophy during the nineteenth and to some extent the twentieth centuries has been an attempt to overcome the difficulties that arose from the empirical philosophy. . . . Critical theory did not, however, fall into a complete skeptical relativism. Criticism became more particularized and directed itself to specific problems in literature.²¹

This method of looking at the specific works to describe what made them good was somewhat of a return to the method of Aristotle. But the simplicity of Aristotle's theory, before it had become confused by several hundred years of new opinions and scores of new approaches, was lost forever. By now such a divergent body of critical opinions exists that relativism has largely replaced skepticism. And neither synthesis nor agreement seem to be forthcoming.

²⁰T. S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," Selected Essays, op. cit., pp. 209-210.

²¹Bate, op. cit., p. 271.

Romanticism

The Romantic movement of the nineteenth century was characterized by two impulses -- the first, outward toward the archaic or the exotic, as seen in the poetry and criticism of Coleridge; the other, inward toward the heart of nature, as seen in the work of Wordsworth. It was a movement inspired by the enthusiasm for freedom which followed the French Revolution; a movement revolutionary in itself, still vehemently opposing whatever remained of rigid Neo-Classicism. In poetry, the spirit was seen in Shelley's anti-dogmatism; in Southey's poetic turning away from eighteenth century actuality and common sense; and in Byron's depiction of lonely wanderers, of remote and independent heroes.

The great contribution of the Romantic period was its emphasis on the imagination as the source of beauty. For the Romantics, nature was not a fact but a mystical phenomenon to be grasped by the imagination. Sensibility, not knowledge, became the source of beauty in art. For Coleridge, in the Biographia Literaria, the function of the critic was to interpret, not to judge. It was fancy and imagination which gave beauty to art. It was the "willing suspension of disbelief"²² which allowed the reader to be caught up in the

²²Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Biographia Literaria," xiv,

enjoyment of art. This suspension of disbelief is a principle widely applied and certainly valid in art, but the concentration on imagination, on interpretation, on mysticism, made Romantic theory difficult to define. In fact, it did not want to be defined. Analysis of art was condemned by Wordsworth, who recommended in its place "organic sensibility,"²³ or a sensitivity to beauty of the whole work, a kind of gift, an ability with which one had to be born. For the Romantic, analysis and description of the separate elements in a work of art could only destroy its beauty and energy. While this reluctance to analyze was a departure from former critical attitudes, certainly insistence on appreciating the unity of a work was not new. As Bate says, "The classic emphasis on the whole, on the total structure was surely organic and Aristotle regarded nature certainly in terms of activity."²⁴ The difference was that for Aristotle, what could be analyzed could also be synthesized again.

The Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, recommended

Anthology of Romanticism, ed. Ernest Bernbaum (New York: Ronald Press, 1948), p. 335.

²³William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," Wordsworth's Poetical Works, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1944), II, p. 388.

²⁴Bate, op. cit., p. 276.

subjectivism, writing from the heart. No subject was beneath the artist's attention. The meanest object could be mystically transformed into beauty through the passionate imagination of the artist. But Hazlitt and Keats saw the danger of egotism and sentimentalism in this doctrine. Keats condemned it in his discussion of "negative capability,"²⁵ while Hazlitt attached it as a limitation of art to a concept of self-expression. But to recommend instinct, intuition, and imagination as the sources of art, while discounting knowledge, made it impossible not to be subjective. In "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive," Hazlitt wrote:

The diffusion of taste is not the same thing as the improvement of taste; but it is only the former of these objects that is promised by public institutions and other artificial means. The number of candidates for fame, and of pretenders to criticism, is thus increased beyond all proportion, while the quantity of genius and feeling remains the same; with this difference, that the man of genius is lost in the crowd of competitors who would never have become such but from encouragement and example, and that the opinion of these few persons whom nature intended for judges is drowned in the noisy suffrages of shallow smatterers of taste.²⁶

Sad to say, the condition Hazlitt mourns is still

²⁵John Keats, Letter, December 21, 1817: The Letters of John Keats, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 71.

²⁶William Hazlitt, "Why the Arts Are Not Progressive," The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London: J. M. Dent and Company, 1902), I, pp. 163-64.

with us. But the idea that nature chooses the critic is based on no definition of nature. In fact, Hazlitt gives us little idea of how we can recognize the real genius, nor of what distinguishes him from the "smatterers" except that he is to be chosen by this elusive "nature."

Hazlitt goes on, "The efforts of genius, in every walk of art can never be properly understood by the generality of mankind."²⁷ And later:

Taste is the highest degree of sensibility, or the impression made on the most cultivated and sensible of minds, as genius is the result of the highest powers both of feeling and invention. It may be objected that the public taste is capable of gradual improvement, because in the end, the public do justice to works of greatest merit. This is a mistake. The reputation ultimately, and often slowly affixed to works of genius is stamped upon them by authority, not by popular consent or the common sense of the word.²⁸

Whether or not we agree with Hazlitt we must recognize his conclusions as being those of "the most representative critic in English Romanticism,"²⁹ far more authoritarian than Classicism, and more authoritarian on the most ethereal of grounds; that is, on the authority of nature which he defined as "the soul of art,"³⁰ and of genius, which he described as

²⁷Ibid., p. 164.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Bate, op. cit., p. 282.

³⁰Hazlitt, op. cit., p. 162.

"some strong quality in the mind, answering to and bringing out some new and striking quality in nature."³¹ Admittedly these terms are difficult to define, but if they are to be accepted as the basis for a whole system of criticism, they ought to be defined.

Hazlitt described an imitation of nature of which "imagination and the passions are a part."³² For him the special medium of the arts was one of imagination or "that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power."³³ He also introduced in two essays, On Modern Comedy and On Shakespeare and Milton, the concept that the age made the man. This concept was to continue through the Victorian Age to the present in a highly developed interest in biographical and historical studies of literature.

The Romantic period contributed several individual concepts which are still influential on our artistic practices: for example, Hazlitt's "sympathetic identification," a concept

³¹William Hazlitt, "The Same Subject Continued," The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, op. cit., VI, p. 42.

³²William Hazlitt, "On Poetry in General," ibid., V, p. 4.

³³Ibid.

known to Aristotle but re-emphasized by the Romantics, was adapted by the theatre as "empathy" and on this principle Stanislavsky based his method for acting. What the Romantics practiced as literary imagination or "association of ideas" grew out of their interest in psychology, and has since become prominent in prose as "stream of consciousness" writing, and in poetry in tangential structuring and word association. Suggestion is becoming an interpretation of imitation. The questions of genius and authority are discussed whenever the problem of censorship in the mass media is discussed; and the problem of public taste, representative of romantic social criticism, is eminently important in any exploration of television dramatic criticism. Had they been able to combine their insights into psychology with the precision of classical scholarship, the Romantics would have been perfect critics; but no age, no criticism has all perfections in itself.

The New Criticism

The new critics, T. S. Eliot, Irving Babbitt, T. E. Hulme, I. A. Richards, and Edmund Wilson are concerned primarily with the "coordination and emerging unities of textures in a poem."³⁴ Their approach is from the structure of the text itself. Bate explains that

³⁴Bate, op. cit., p. 277.

. . . in actual practice, this approach has stressed the medium of art without an equal emphasis on the value and range of what is being organized. It is a concern . . . with harmonia, or the unifying principle of experience, without a corresponding stress on mimesis, or the massiveness and significance of the context of experience.³⁵

In this limiting, the new critics depart from the Classicists, while at the same time they react against the looseness and lack of definition which characterized Romanticism. On the other hand, it has, by its insistence on critical evaluation of the work, served as a corrective to intensive historical and biographical studies which have at times lost sight of the work of art. However much the new critics limit their practice of criticism, their theory has wide applications.

Eliot recommends to the serious poet that he cultivate an historical sense, a knowledge of the tradition from which literature has sprung, not to the end of copying any single admired poet or group, but so as to write, "not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."³⁶

Eliot denounces subjectivism when he says, "The

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen and Company, Ltd., 1950), p.49.

progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."³⁷ Expanding this he says later in his essay,

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But of course, only those who have personality and emotion know what it means to want to escape from them.³⁸

From the critical viewpoint, he takes his stand as a textual critic when he says, "To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim; for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad."³⁹ This concern with the text first, and with the poet's life and background second, and only as they are relevant to the work, is also the creed of the Scientific Method critic, La Driere.

In speaking of dramatic criteria, Irving Babbitt shows the same attitude in his Criticism in America: "As a matter of fact," he says, "the dramatic artist is to be judged by no other standard than that applied to any other creative artist: What has he tried to express, and how has he expressed it?"⁴⁰

³⁷Ibid., pp. 52-53.

³⁸Ibid., p. 58.

³⁹Ibid., p. 59.

⁴⁰Babbitt, loc. cit. In the criticism of mass media, which has to have so many outside considerations: time,

Trying to place this more objective criticism against the background of Romanticism, William Van O'Connor sums up the problem and tries to solve it: "Probably it is true," he says, speaking romantically, "that all worthwhile criticism is in some sense impressionistic, in the sense that the critic lends himself to the work, trying to see it in its own terms, to sympathize with it, and to give the reader some understanding of the kind of excitement it can generate. But to be seen disinterestedly," he continues in a classical vein, "a work has also to be subjected to the kind of analysis that is open to critics who are aware of ways in which a given work is like or unlike those in the genre to which it belongs and who, possessing a fairly complex knowledge of critical theory, can discuss the structure of the given work."⁴¹

But the specific differences between objective and subjective criticism are not easily reconciled. The field in which the new critics practice is fraught with new points of view, spinning on and on toward ultimate and inescapable relativism.

sponsors, individual actors seen last week in a different role, technical problems -- this critical single-mindedness is more important than ever, for too often all considerations are given equal significance.

⁴¹O'Connor, op. cit., p. 72.

Summary

Where does the solution lie? Must we find some system of well-defined terms and carefully selected criteria which we may apply objectively to each work of art? Or can we choose, as Hazlitt suggests, those critics appointed by nature as natural judges? By what criteria shall we know them? Can we retreat behind some platitude like "art for art's sake"? Or has relativism become a dogma?

The answer is: Yes, relativism is becoming a dogma, the remedy for which is the adoption of a critical process as urged by the Scientific Method. As O'Connor says of popular magazine critics, "One feels that critical intelligence and sensibility were frequently dissipated for lack of a method, for lack of the complex knowledge of the ways in which life gets into literature."⁴²

A process is needed which employs well-defined terms admitting little interpretation, a process which looks at the work of art itself and which brings to bear on the analysis all relevant knowledge. A process must be used in which the critic re-evaluates his own evaluations in order to deepen and enrich the processes of reading and of judging. This is

⁴²Ibid., p. 87.

a disciplined kind of criticism, but it is not rigid. As Winters recommended, the process must be developed so that the unique, subjective part of judgment can be limited to the area in which it belongs, while the technical or factual parts of the evaluation are kept objective enough and specific enough to be intelligible.

The development of a disciplined critical process can only be accomplished in the presence of certain attitudes on the part of the critic. For the critic to attempt the practice of criticism without a firm knowledge of what it is (that is, of what he is doing), and to practice it without sincerity forces him to relativism. As Bate cautions:

If a student can vividly see the end of art as a heightened awareness of reality, however variously reality may be conceived, then he is less likely to feel that the special technical aspects of art with which the criticism must deal -- the conventional forms and techniques indigenous to the art -- are hopelessly arbitrary like the chance rules of a game.⁴³

Bate recommends a flexibility and an experimental open-mindedness derived from the classical ideal to which criticism owes its existence, "the active and total employment of the whole mind."⁴⁴ And the whole mind of the critic can best be exercised under the logical discipline of a method.

⁴³Bate, op. cit., p. x.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 278.

Once the method or process has become a habit, the critic can hope, with some sense of order, to heed the advice which comes to him from all sides. From Aristotle comes the minimum advice that the critic understand the art he criticizes, in terms of what it is, and what has been or can be done with that form; from Eliot, the minimum requirement of maturity, that the critic might know the reality of life which is the basis of literature; from the Romantics, that the critic might look into the psychology which underlies life and art; the Scientific Method group adds that he might apply his knowledge of the peripheral areas around art only as they are significant to the art, and that he might have a way to do what he does, a consistent critical method; and most great critics recommend that he avoid confining his criticism to details which lack wider applications. As O'Connor puts it, "Perhaps the point is simply that highly memorable criticism is read not only for the illumination it brings to a given work but for the general principles it provides."⁴⁵

Whether television drama critics can or do meet these requirements will be the subject of this inquiry.

⁴⁵O'Connor, op. cit., p. 89.

CHAPTER II

PROBLEMS IN THEATRE CRITICISM

Before we begin to explore television criticism, we must look at its predecessor and model, modern dramatic criticism, for the subject matter and techniques of theatre criticism will often provide a basis for judging drama on television.

Modern drama has come "from virtually all of Europe and the United States," and rivals Greek tragedy and Elizabethan theatre as "a sufficient summation and distillation" of its times.¹ And these complex times of ours have called forth a complex and compelling body of dramatic literature, from the pioneering realism of Ibsen and Strindberg, to the revolutionary social drama of Hauptmann, Wedekind, Becque, and Tolstoy; to Chekhov's distinctive drama of attrition; to the ironic, poetic drama of Shaw; the symbolic dramas of Rostand and Molnar; the sophisticated domestic comedies of Maugham and Coward; the imaginative satires of Barrie; the

¹John Gassner (ed.), Treasury of the Theatre (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. xiv.

naturalist tragedies of the expressionist, O'Neill; the anti-heroic dramas of Maxwell Anderson; the stylized plays of Wilder; the Romantic folk-dramas of Connelly; the psychological dramas of Tennessee Williams; the realist tragedies of Miller; and even to the present with the biographical and realist plays of William Gibson, Gore Vidal, and Paddy Chayevsky. Beyond these are all the musicals, operettas, and revues which make up so important a part of American theatre.

The Problem

How can the critic hope to evaluate intelligently this broad field of modern drama as well as the dramas of other eras which continually are being revived? George Jean Nathan suggested the elusiveness of this problem when he wrote: "Dramatic criticism is an attempt to formulate rules of conduct for that lovable, wayward, charming, wilful vagabond that is the theatre."²

Approaches to the Problem

Edward A. Wright suggests one approach to understanding this wayward vagabond: "In a very real sense dramatic criticism can be said to exist on at least three

²George Jean Nathan, The Critic and the Drama (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1922), p. 51.

levels which we shall define as the literary, the theatrical, and the practical.³ On the literary level, the critic brings to bear on his analysis of theatre his understanding of philosophy and sociology as a background; his knowledge of dramatic structure, theme, characterization, language, and whatever biographical and historical material is relevant to evaluation. On the theatrical level, he questions how well the play acts, what its psychological impact will be in the theatre, and how its setting, lighting, and sound will affect the audience. On the practical level, the critic is concerned with the box-office, with the possible popularity of the play -- to justify the expense of producing it.

A paraphrase of these considerations might be found in the general critical rule which Carlyle, Croce, Spingarn, and most current critic-journalists have, at one time or another, borrowed from Goethe: What is the artist trying to do? How well has he done it? Was it worth doing? In the first, we are perhaps questioning the literary merit of the play from the viewpoint basically of genre; in the second, we are viewing the theatrical as well as dramatic merits in order to evaluate the artist's craft and imagination against

³Edward A. Wright, A Primer for Playgoers (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1958), pp. 42-43.

what has been done and can be done in that genre; and in the third, we make a value judgment based on our knowledge of the play's significance seen against reality. Was what it said worth saying? Was money and talent fully utilized? At least by beginning with either of these approaches the critic can hope to deduce an orderly method for evaluating theatre.

Once he has formulated his framework, he must know how to apply it to theatre. What must the critic know about theatre? Wright lists as fundamental that "the dramatic critic must have some knowledge of the various forms and techniques common to drama and theatre production both past and present."⁴ John Dolman adds to this the need for weighing the play against the qualities of unity, emphasis, rhythm, balance, proportion, harmony, and grace.⁵

But Walter Kerr insists that all these minimum requirements ought to have been assimilated as unconscious habits before a man begins to practice criticism. He insists:

There are all kinds of canons of criticism, a good many of them are thoroughly sound. I'm not one for junking a hard-won dramatic principle just because it is two thousand years old. But this sort of thing is groundwork, the cutting of baby teeth. It is something to be investigated at the student level, something to be

⁴Ibid., p. 21.

⁵John Dolman, Jr., The Art of Play Production (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946), pp. 72-94.

soaked up.

Once it has been soaked up, however, it should be expected to disappear into the general taste, the informed substratum of the man ⁶

So long as actor, director, and reader can be assured that knowledge and fact do underlie the critic's opinions, they may be willing to accept his word. But in some cases, knowledge has become immersed to the vanishing point, and nothing can be seen on the surface but opinion. The suspicion that the critic may be speaking from uninformed or non-reflective opinion is one deterrent to credibility.

Broad Aims in the Practice of Criticism

What do modern writers see as the duty of critics? From general reading, several broad aims may be gleaned. Eric Bentley takes the position that the critic's job is to say whether a play is good or bad, using the verb to be, the adjectives good and bad, and the conjunctions and and but. He explains that the critic

. . . will withstand the temptation to omit the ands, because he is interested in the additional fact that tips the scale. He will insist on the buts, because his mind is dialectical; he likes to see the other side of the coin. Since he cannot draw back from the act of appraisal, he will not substitute modish verbiage, scientific or belle-

⁶Walter Kerr, Pieces at Eight (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 58.

letteristic, for plain bads and goods.⁷

In fact, several of the critics are adamant on this point of simplicity. Kerr illustrates by commenting on the critical methods of George Jean Nathan:

Taste is in large part a matter of exposure, and since Mr. Nathan has clearly been exposed to more plays than anyone else writing just now, it follows that even though he does not spend much time in tossing words like "peripeteia," "crisis," and "empathy" around, his judgment is going to be a little sounder than that of the cum laude in Dramatic Criticism 209.⁸

On the other hand, Mr. Kerr would probably admit that Mr. Nathan had been exposed also to many sittings of Drama 209, 309, and 409, and is thoroughly aware of "peripeteia" where it is significant and probably takes it into account whenever he examines an audience-reaction. What Mr. Kerr is admiring in Mr. Nathan is not just simplicity, but rather informed simplicity -- informed through education, experience, and discipline.

This simple honesty in telling the good from the bad has the important effect of helping "the game of another author by crying him up and advertising him."⁹ And while in

⁷Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event: An American Chronicle (New York: Horizon Press, 1954), p. 16.

⁸Kerr, op. cit., p. 57.

⁹John Macy, "The Critical Game," Contemporary American Criticism, ed. James Cloyd Bowman (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), p. 264.

the area of literature the critic "cannot make the fortune of a book or influence at the creative source the work of a man sufficiently strong and original to be worth reading," while he "cannot prevent bad books from being written and read,"¹⁰ the drama critic, particularly in New York, can hope to prevent bad plays from being attended. With theatre tickets at a high cost, the theatre audience, always limited, is now being more discriminating, and often awaits the critic's reaction before venturing to the theatre. Of course there have been instances which deny this, for example, the success of The Music Man over the objections of the critics, but in general the power of the critics is seen, at least by producers, as being formidable. Then, too, there are occasions when critics are wrong and producers are right.

It is when critics fail to help the artist's game that the question is asked: What right has the drama critic to pass judgment on the work of other men, artists whose labors earn part of the critic's bread and butter? Macy asks: "To what extent is the critic parasitic?" He answers:

To this extent; he is dealing with ideas already expressed, with cooked and predigested food. It is easier for the mind to think of something to say about an idea that has already gone through the cerebral

¹⁰Ibid.

processes than it is to take the raw materials of life and make something.¹¹

Of course the accusation "Parasite!" is more often flung at the disapproving critic, while the applauding critic is accepted as one who appreciates art. Nevertheless, with the possible stigma of parasitism attached to him before he begins, the critic must make each piece of his writing meritorious for its own sake. He must make a literature of his own, with strength enough and truth enough to stand when the play has been forgotten. And yet the critic must not use the play as a vehicle for self-exaltation; his first concern is the play -- and a simple, honest appraisal of it.

To that first requirement of simple honesty, Bentley adds a second; the need for judging theatre in all its parts, a consideration seen in the principle that Coleridge expressed when he defined beauty as "multeity in unity." Bentley puts it:

The theatre critic's concern is theatre; playwright and actor, director, scene designer, musician. But since all these work together to interpret life, the critic's approach will not be merely formal. Being a journalist, the drama critic will report the news. . . . It is the critic's job to identify and describe the New Actress, the New Playwright, the New Rococo, the New Esthetism, the New Conformism, the New Conservatism before they grow old.¹²

¹¹Ibid., p. 263.

¹²Bentley, op. cit., p. 17. This concept of critic as

To appreciate the perfection of the whole -- the play -- it will be helpful to understand the part each artist takes in producing it. Judging playwright and musician may depend in large part on education, while experience might be of help in judging director, designer, and actor. In order to describe the New actress, playwright, or movement, it will be necessary to know what has gone before, to have learned what was new even centuries ago, in order to judge how new the New really is.

From the broad aim of judging all parts of the theatre and its influence on the audience derives the duty of being specific enough and stalwart enough to effect changes in theatre, as did George Jean Nathan in the theatre of the early twentieth century. One admirer writes of Nathan

In his reviews he showed no mercy for the shoddy. Single-handedly, he killed the theatre of Brody, Belasco, the Shuberts. He was the first critic to champion O'Neill and O'Casey, and practically rammed the serious foreign playwrights -- Ibsen, Chekov, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Sudermann -- down the throats of the American public.¹³

But how often do poor conditions in the theatre, brilliant foreign plays, and an authoritative critic coincide

reporter will be especially important to our consideration of the television critic, for the privilege of reporting the news often enhances the effectiveness of his critique.

¹³Helen Lawrenson, "The Decline of the American Drama Critic," Esquire, LIII (March, 1960), p. 96.

so as to produce a change of this sort? And what is this "American public" which benefits from the change? Is it composed of playgoers only, or is the critic talking to producers and performers, and to other critics? John Macy says,

Critics play with each other in a professional game. The few amateurs who sit as spectators are a select minority who have seen the game before and who, though not in the professional class, are instructed, cultivated, and have some knowledge of the plays. The critical game is enjoyed by those who are themselves critical and least in need of enlightenment.¹⁴

However much this limits the reach of the critic, it does at least decrease his problems. He need not start from scratch with every piece of criticism as the television critic might with a critically uninformed and disinterested mass audience. On the other hand, unless the theatre critic can be effective with the theatre-going elite, and with producers, directors, actors, and other critics, he is talking on the empty air. One wonders therefore about the validity of such statements as actress Vivien Leigh made on a recent television interview: "The critics have no power in England, thank heaven."¹⁵

A third aim of the critic would be to stimulate reaction to the drama, for as Mencken puts it, "The spectator,

¹⁴Macy, op. cit., p. 265.

¹⁵David Susskind interview with Vivien Leigh on Open End, seen in Boston, Massachusetts, June 13, 1960.

untutored, stands unmoved; he sees the world of art, but it fails to make any intelligible impression on him. If he were spontaneously alive to it, there would be no need for criticism."¹⁶ It is difficult to agree that the audience could stand unmoved by some works of art whether they understood the works or not, but certainly Mencken is right in questioning the intelligibility of the impression made. Writing down coherently reactions which the audience has felt but may be unable to express is an important role of the critic.

A fourth need vehemently proposed by Bentley is that American critics must learn to take sides. While in Europe political plays cause violent reactions among press and people, American plays, both social and political, are often viewed dispassionately. Bentley believes there is

. . . a single orthodoxy on Broadway, a liberalism so hazy and insubstantial that it can be shared by Communists and Republicans; and we go to political plays to make such epoch-making discoveries as that we like negroes /sic/, dislike Anti-Semites, and wish our country both to win the war and be nice to the natives.¹⁷

Such a critical attitude may very well spring from the relativism we have already noted as characteristic of

¹⁶H. L. Mencken, "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," Bowman, op. cit., p. 73.

¹⁷Eric Bentley, What Is Theatre? (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), p. 238.

modern life and modern critical thought in America. And among the remedies for this relativism we have already noted the practice of basing criticism on general principles, so that we may take sides and still maintain a consistent critical method. Bentley uses Lessing as an exemplar of this:

The plays that Lessing reviewed were forgotten long ago, but the reviews live, partly because he has the gift of momentarily reviving those dead dramas but much more because each particular review is part of a larger and more permanent enterprise. Through the length and breadth of his reviews Lessing was stating a philosophy of the drama. . . . He was fighting off what he firmly held to be wrong and he was constantly asking himself what he held to be right.¹⁸

But before the critic can accomplish all these aims he must put his intellectual house in order.

The Critic's Training and Discipline

How does the critic prepare himself for such a task? George Bernard Shaw, the wise man of drama and drama criticism, recommended training, experience, and discipline. In a series of letters to a young London critic and friend, R. E. Golding Bright, he outlined his ideas in the form of advice:

Remember, to be a critic, you must be not only a bit of an expert in your subject, but you must also have

¹⁸Ibid., pp. ix-x.

literary skill, and trained critical skill too -- the power of analysis, comparison &c. I have had to go through years of work as a reviewer of books, a critic of pictures, a writer on political and social questions, and a musical critic, in order to qualify myself for the post I now hold on the staff of The World. You must not think that because you only heard of me for the first time the other day or thereabouts that I got such reputation as I have cheaply.¹⁹

Looking at the experience of some of today's noted critics, we may see examples of the need for such patience and training. Brooks Atkinson bases his authority on forty years' experience as reporter, teacher, book reviewer, drama critic, war correspondent, and Pulitzer Prize-winning author. Walter Kerr has had long experience as a teacher of drama and theatre, and as an author. Harold Clurman, another respected New York critic, has spent most of his adult life in theatre, most recently directing the successful Broadway run of Anouilh's Waltz of the Toreadors.

Shaw's first demand was that the critic know drama.

To the young critic he wrote:

As to what to read, read anything you feel curious about. . . . But in any case, read dramatic literature, not histories or criticisms of it. Read three or four of the most famous plays of Moliere and Victor Hugo, and sample Beaumarchais, Voltaire, De Musset, Augier, and Dumas films until you know their styles. Read all Goethe's

¹⁹George Bernard Shaw, Advice to a Young Critic and Other Letters, comp. E. J. West (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955), p. 4.

plays and a lot of Schiller's. Read a rhymed play of Dryden's, a play of Wycherley's, some of Congreve's, several of Sheridan, a Boucicault and a Robertson. Read Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripedes and Aristophanes (the Greek literature is very short). Get translations if you don't know the languages. Read them with a notion of their chronological order. Read Ibsen all through. Also Cibbers Apology and any memoirs of actors that you can unearth. That will do for a beginning.²⁰

This advice followed the Aristotelian advice for learning by examining the art itself in order to understand the art one is criticizing. Once drama was known, the history of criticism could be examined. Shaw recommended reading "all the great critics -- Ruskin, Richard Wagner, Lessing, Lamb and Hazlitt."²¹ In order to justify judging the work of dramatic artists, Shaw saw the necessity for immersing oneself in dramatic and related arts, and for taking the time to reflect on them. For his own experiences as a young critic he could advise Golding Bright:

Get a ticket to the British Museum reading room and live there as much as you can. Go to all the first rate orchestral concerts and to the opera as well as to the theatre. Join debating societies and learn to speak in public. Haunt little Sunday evening political meetings and exercise that accomplishment. Study men and politics in this way.²²

Here Shaw echoes the classical plea for "the active

²⁰Ibid., p. 45.

²¹Ibid., p. 13.

²²Ibid.

and total employment of the whole mind." That such breadth of training is desirable is illustrated in Helen Lawrenson's admiring comments on American critic Richard Watts. He is "the only one of the newspaper critics whose reviews ever betray an interest in world affairs and in intelligent social and political awareness."²³ Perhaps the deterrent to the critic's taking sides is that they don't know which side to take.

In addition to experience and education, Shaw noted the necessity for practice and discipline. He wrote to the same young critic advising him to write a couple of books on the drama, burning them afterwards if he wanted, just so long as he wrote them, or else keeping them in a drawer for the next few years (advice reminiscent of Horace's advice to the Piso's), in order to see what maturity had wrought. By writing on the drama, Shaw foresaw, the young critic could evolve and solidify his theory of theatre. Shaw explicitly admonished him that writing as a habit be continued -- "a thousand words a day for the next five years for at least nine months every year."²⁴ Richard Kronenberger, critic for Time Magazine, may well have developed his facility from his

²³Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 97.

²⁴Shaw, op. cit., p. 14.

experience as novelist and essayist.

Above all, Shaw recommended patient discipline. He wrote to the young critic, ". . . it will take at least a year or two of tough work before you will be able to build up for yourself either the courage or the right to take heroic measures."²⁵

Other critics argue against the demanding labor that Shaw recommended. Huneker said:

A man's ponderous learning is of no more value than the superficial skating of some merry emotional blade over the dramatic ice. The main point is -- particularly in dramatic criticism -- whether the writer holds our attention. Otherwise his work has no excuse for existence. Be as profound as you please but be pleasing.²⁶

Curiously enough, he cites the experienced and learned Shaw as the critic who holds one's attention best, illustrating inadvertantly that a critic can be superficially interesting on cleverness alone, but that to be interesting always and universally the critic does need profundity and maturity along with sharpness and wit; disciplined, informed judgment along with subjective enthusiasm.

As a safeguard against unbridled subjectivism, Helen

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶James Huneker, "Introduction," Dramatic Opinions and Essays with an Apology by Bernard Shaw (New York: Brentano's, 1907), I, p. x.

Lawrenson offers: "It might therefore seem as if T. S. Eliot's remark about critical methods reveals the prime requisite:

'The only method is to be very intelligent.'²⁷ By intelligent adherence to both empathy and esthetic distance the critic can hope to preserve his taste from error.

The requirement most often and most strongly demanded by practicing critics is that they maintain their loyalty to themselves. Bentley says:

The critic is uncompromising, not because he regards himself as infallible, nor even because he feels very sure of himself but because it is his job to be so. It is true he enjoys the job, he enjoys a fight. His writing embodies his zest for living.²⁸

In another book, What Is Theatre?, Bentley states:

"For the fact that a critic may be wrong is no reason for him, especially as he thinks, poor man, that he is right, not to express his views as clearly as he can. . . .²⁹

George Jean Nathan was even more insistent on this point, and it was probably his combination of wisdom and implacability which made him respected. He wrote:

The future of the theatre, in short, is to be guaranteed not by praising it when it does not merit praise, but by

²⁷Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 94.

²⁸Bentley, Event, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁹Bentley, Theatre, op. cit., pp. 235-36.

hitting it on the chin time and again without let-up until those who serve it are made to realize that they will have to alter their procedure or go bankrupt.³⁰

Any other course seemed to Nathan, contemptible. Of ineffectual critics he wrote:

By taking a lenient course they preserve their comfort with the newspapers that employ them, avoid possible embarrassing difficulties with complaining producers, enjoy personal advertising in quotations of their praises, and safeguard themselves from being charged with being too insistent growlers or faultfinders. All they think about is the softness of their jobs and the bad luck it would be to lose them by telling what they fear may be the unwelcome and now and again offensive truth.³¹

Perhaps this is another explanation why critics often fail to take sides. One courageous and self-assured critic, Kenneth Tynan, has had more attention paid him in the press and on television than has been heard here for some time. Some of it is favorable; much is resentful. Helen Lawrenson says of him:

The New Yorker has quite a catch in Kenneth Tynan, acerbic gadfly of the British theatre, here on loan from the London Observer. Still in his early thirties, he is young enough to have convictions and impudent enough to express them in areas where his aging and angelic colleagues timorously avoid treading, namely the inquisition of established idols.³²

³⁰George Jean Nathan, The Theatre in the Fifties (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 286.

³¹Ibid., p. 287.

³²Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 97.

But before the critic can be adamant and unchanging about his opinions, he must have his facts right. Shaw advised his young critic friend: "Get your facts right first; that is the foundation of all style, because style is the expression of yourself; and you cannot express yourself genuinely except on the basis of precise reality."³³ Shaw illustrated the correct attention to explicitness when he corrected a manuscript submitted to him by a young critic. When the young man followed a general value judgment with a specific comment on a distinct virtue of the performance, Shaw said: "Now here you are saying something definite -- you are writing criticism -- you are describing what you saw. Don't you feel how much better it is than mere pompous or unmeaning phrase-slinging like 'Undoubtedly it is one of the finest things he has done &c.'?"³⁴ In this way, Shaw echoed the principle we examined in Chapter One, that the critical evaluation is made in the light of a description of the work as it stands.

Helen Lawrenson, speaking of American critics, complains: "The simple statement that a play is 'great' or 'the best' may be criticism of a sort . . . but it is not

³³Shaw, Advice, op. cit., p. 13.

³⁴Ibid., p. 24.

creative criticism. It is not the sort we have a right to expect from professionals."³⁵

Stark Young, for twenty-five years theatre critic of the New Republic, tells us what can be expected from professionals: such a plan would clear up many of the complaints made against modern critical ineptitude. He discusses each area for critical concern. Of acting he says:

We should have technical comments for acting that would parallel at least what we sometimes . . . get for singing or orchestra. . . . In the theatre it would mean that the critic would take it as all art is taken -- for the excellence of the interpretation, the perfection of style. He would also consider it as a technical art in itself, with whatever limitations, possibilities, revelations might accrue. Capital examples of what I mean we have right under our noses; in the reporting of football games, of baseball, prizefighting -- not to mention bullfights, in nearby Mexico, where the critics reach a very passion of precise detail³⁶

By pointing out such technical items, the critic may add to the general sum of theory and practice.³⁷

Mr. Young feels not only that theatre-goers would learn what to look for in a performance, but that actors and technicians would rejoice that their talent and labor have not gone unnoticed. Young's plea is not for vast critical treatises in the daily papers, but only for explicitness in the praise

³⁵Lawrenson, op. cit., p. 94.

³⁶Stark Young, "The Art of Theatre Criticism," Harper's, CCXX (March, 1960), p. 26.

³⁷Ibid., p. 29.

or censure of the work. He is asking only that the critic "look sharp and try to be as useful as possible (and more illuminating) to the people on the stage as well as to his readers."³⁸

Examining this problem of technical criticism, George Jean Nathan explores some of the areas where critics lack discernment. "An actor, or actress," he begins, "by virtue of an attractive personality, physical suitability to the role and similar superficial attributes may confuse some critics into mistaking for exceptional talent what is merely accident of casting."³⁹

On the same subject, Helen Lawrenson castigates Brooks Atkinson for overworking the word "incomparable" to describe actors. "Few people are incomparable," she says, "Merman, Boyer and Colbert can, of course, be compared with other actors and it is the function of the critic to do so, or if not to compare them, at least to attempt to probe the quality of their performances."⁴⁰

Another problem is the difficulty of distinguishing the actor's talent from the director's guidance of that talent.

³⁸Ibid., p. 31.

³⁹Nathan, Fifties, op. cit., p. 278.

⁴⁰Lawrenson, loc. cit.

What is the role of the director, and how much does the audience know about it? The critic should make this clear.

Nathan says:

There are critics, for example, who imagine that good direction consists solely in sustaining the stage movement, seeing to it that the lighting is proper, and getting the actors to speak clearly. There are others who think that a mere avoidance of the clichés marks a director as an exceptional fellow and still others who view originality and novelty, however forced and controvertible, as a token of directorial genius. There are, however, fewer who appreciate that expert direction begins with the script itself before even the actors are hired.⁴¹

Nathan included among the directorial tasks to be examined by the critic; attention to casting, set design planning, and editing of the script, for it is the director's work "first and foremost . . . to create a show, not in the vulgar box-office sense but in the intelligent best, out of what the dramatist, however sacrosanct has written."⁴²

Since in the theatre what the playwright has written blends with what the director has wrought and makes a whole, the people who worked on the production have the right to expect criticism which judges the play as a whole; not merely as it is written, but also as it is performed. Theatre artists justly complain when critics take the easier path of

⁴¹Nathan, Fifties, op. cit., p. 282.

⁴²Ibid.

deducing the meaning of the play without discussing both meaning and execution as they support one another. Nathan says on this problem: "Much of current criticism remains and doubtless will remain impervious to the matter of artistic treatment, venerative instead of mere subject matter."⁴³

The Critic's Problem

In looking at the demands on the critic -- that he tell good from bad, that he provoke reaction and take sides, that he be well read, disciplined, respectful, intelligent, firm, restrained, acquainted with technique, explicit, and true to the facts, we see how wide and deep and how consciously felt must be the informed sub-stratum of the man, which Walter Kerr espoused as the critic's base.

Yet however closely the critic disciplines himself he will be, on occasion, pompous; sometimes wrong; sometimes blind, and often partial. As Macy says: "The critic is always playing his own game, selfish, egotistical, expressive of his own will, and no more disinterested than was Arnold himself when he took pen in hand to slay the Philistines or to sign a contract with his manager for a lecture tour in America."⁴⁴

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Macy, op. cit., p. 264.

Beyond all his discipline, the critic is human. As

Nathan says:

Criticism may be criticism, but human nature is human nature and when one meets the other in such instances there comes a tug of war, with human nature pulling criticism off its feet and landing it haplessly on its bottom.⁴⁵

If theatre is wayward and wilful, and human nature a deterrent to logical criticism, then honesty, discipline, intelligence, and above all, a systematic critical method are essential to the modern drama critic.

As we saw in the history of criticism, literary critics have a tradition to follow and relative leisure in which to judge literature against life and to develop a method based on general principles. A study of modern drama criticism, on the other hand, reveals the confusion brought about by the relativism of modern thought and by the necessity for judging, in one night, whether a newborn play is to live or to die.

⁴⁵Nathan, Fifties, op. cit., p. 280.

CHAPTER III

TELEVISION DRAMA* AND THE TELEVISION CRITIC

How does television drama differ from the stage drama we have just discussed? Most basically, it departs from theatre in a peculiar blending of selected stage techniques with selected film techniques. Live television drama with its virtually coherent and uninterrupted performances approaches the wholeness and unity of stage drama. Film, on the other hand, though conceived as a unit, is shot in segments and often out of sequence. But its point of view -- through the eye of the camera -- is also television's point of view. Film is an important teacher for television.

Like theatre, film has been criticized on many levels, all the way from semi-gossip columns to serious magazines like Film Quarterly and Sight and Sound. It has drawn perceptive critics like Paul Rotha and Arthur Knight, and has been furthered by theoretician-artists like Pudovkin and

*Television drama will be considered as any drama presented on television whether adapted from another medium or written especially for television.

Eisenstein.

But the question remains: by what standards are we to judge television, which partakes of two arts but is a distinct entity? "Can the critical standards of theater or film or radio be applied to television, or does it demand evaluation on its own? The critics have not decided."¹ This is the problem.

Television drama is affected by the problems and demands peculiar to the medium. Television, still young, grew up in the presence of a sophisticated audience. As Frank Stanton has noted: "Television is the only medium I know of that came into being with its critics already waiting for it."² Television has never been allowed the luxury of making mistakes unnoticed:

Poetry, history, art, music, the theater, the dance, all these evolved their own standards of excellence over long periods of trial and error. Criticism came along much later, only after standards had been established, and itself slowly became an art, until much of it was prized for its own sake long after its specific objects may have been forgotten.³

Whether poetry, history, art and the others did, in

¹Frank Stanton, "Television in Our Society," Printer's Ink (August 14, 1959), p. 58.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

fact, develop unnoticed to a state of beauty is a question. For every interested observer of the early attempts would have been a critic. What these arts and their critics have gained by such long life is perspective -- something which neither broadcasters nor its critics have had time to achieve.

Television drama must often bow, too, to the expediency of big businesses which support it, and must face the stigma attached to commercialized art. Richard Austin Smith speaks for many when he says: "The overall standard of our system, which is based on the sale of a product, must go down."⁴

Television drama is transient; half hours follow other half hours, soon to be forgotten. And televised drama faces severe censorship because it is carried on a publicly owned medium.

Problems of the Playwright

The first person to feel the pinch of television's restrictions and the uncertainty arising from its newness is the dramatist. Speaking of the best plays of 1956, Clifton Fadiman wrote:

Most of these shows were one-shots, written and built for their little hour, written to be forgotten. . . . Thus keeping in mind that Radio-TV eats its own children, we

⁴Richard Austin Smith, "TV: The Light That Failed," Fortune, LVIII (December, 1958), p. 166.

must judge the lives of its products as we judge those of midges and may-flies, not carp and elephants.⁵

Such a critical attitude might tend to discourage the serious dramatist were it not for the advantage that however brief the hour, the audience is great. And we must admit that many of our serious plays, though they may indeed be forgotten, are worthy of being remembered. Gore Vidal, speaking modestly of television drama, is convinced that "though the highest plays of a Williams, of a Brecht, of a Giraudoux . . . are not being equaled on television, there are, nevertheless, signs and portents."⁶ And when we see that in 1956 the largest single block of network programming time was given to drama -- 2902 hours⁷-- we see how carp and elephant may very well be forthcoming.

The newness of television leaves the dramatist blind in some areas: first, "he has only a vague notion of whom he is writing for,"⁸ Fadiman tells us.

He works also against other dramatic traditions;

⁵Clifton Fadiman, The Prize Plays of Television and Radio (New York: Random House, 1957), p. vii.

⁶Gore Vidal, "Television Drama, circa 1956," Theatre Arts, XL (December, 1956), p. 65.

⁷CBS Report, Free Television and the American People (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1958), p. 6.

⁸Fadiman, loc. cit.

trying hard to discover just what form is proper for this still strange, still new medium, he cannot help being influenced by, often disturbed by, the powerful successful techniques of the stage and film. Among other restraints are two formidable ones: the fear of using language whose color or subtlety may puzzle a mass audience; the fear of making statements about human life that may baffle or upset them, or worse still, baffle or upset the sponsor, the agency, or the network vice-president.

The radio and TV dramatist is competing, not with other plays, but with a turbid, miscellaneous flow of communication within which he must somehow contrive to make his message stand out.⁹

While the theatre intermission is often spent in discussion of the play, the television intermission -- or commercial -- is designed to distract the audience from the play to the product. While the stage dramatist works under rather loose time limits, the television dramatist must find something to say which will fill peculiar spaces of time like twenty-eight minutes and fifteen seconds.

And then he must find something new to say, something which will keep the audience listening. Paddy Chayevsky, for years a successful television playwright, calls television "an endless, almost monstrous drain." He asks, "How many ideas does a writer have? How many insights can he make? How deep can he probe into himself, how much energy can he activate?"¹⁰

⁹Ibid., pp. vii-viii.

¹⁰Paddy Chayevsky, Television Plays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. xiv.

Problems of the Director

Once the writer has solved his problems as best he can, the producer and director face in their turn the problems of television which distinguish it from the stage. George Schaefer, former Broadway director and for the last ten years a successful television director, examines these for us:

"For all its mechanical wonders television cannot produce the electricity that characterizes theatre at its best."¹¹ For how can the actors play to an audience which they can only imagine? "No," Schaefer continues, "there can be no doubt about the advantage of directing a production offered to a captive [theatre] audience in which individuals submerge their individuality, become part of a group reaction, and consequently are collectively more deeply moved or delighted."¹²

So the television director must work with little knowledge of his audience, with severe limitations of time, and often space, and with the rigid demands of machinery. He must endure censorship, pressure from networks, agencies or sponsors, and must be efficient in handling the eminently complicated techniques of directing for television.

¹¹George Schaefer, "Theatre Versus Television," Theatre Arts, XLII (May, 1958), p. 33.

¹²Ibid.

On the other hand, television gives him distinct advantages if he knows how to use them. By conventions adopted from the film, background music may support the action and establish a mood. This technique is less often used on the stage. The camera can isolate actions and reactions, can clarify, can itself establish a mood by the rhythm of its movements. And television, in a way native to no other medium, is intimate.

The transience of the television play, a disadvantage in every other way, has one good point.

The knowledge that the television performance is a one-time-only, now-or-never affair provides another advantage. Undoubtedly this is also a challenge, but it is possible to set up a schedule of rehearsals so that the actual performance represents a peak effort.¹³

An understanding of these problems and advantages would give the audience a more informed enjoyment of television drama, but the audience is certainly unaware of most of these, and even the critic seems unaware. Should the audience be led toward a more intelligent appreciation of television, and is it not the critic's business to lead the audience in this way? In brief, do we need the critic?

¹³Ibid., p. 96.

The Critic's Role

Frank Stanton offers two points of view. First, that great events "do not have to be filtered through the appraising accounts of reporters and editors. They can be witnessed by the people themselves, who can make their own judgments."¹⁴ From this statement we might assume that the people, at least, do not need the critic. But it has also been pointed out that "the television critic is read by hundreds of thousands, for precisely the same reasons that persuade a football crowd to buy a newspaper on the way home in order to read about the match they have just seen."¹⁵

On the other hand, Stanton avers: "This enormous potential of television as a force in our society warrants, and indeed compels, continuing and responsible examination of the medium -- by those outside the broadcasting business as well as by those within it."¹⁶ From this we would assume that the critic should share with the industry the privilege of criticizing television. Peter Black, an English critic,

¹⁴Stanton, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁵Peter Black, "Criticism in Television," Television in the Making, ed. Paul Rotha (New York: Focal Press, 1956), p. 168.

¹⁶Stanton, loc. cit.

illuminates this point when he says: ". . . the only immediate, independent public reaction available to television writers, producers and actors is that supplied by the television critic."¹⁷

Hubbell Robinson, Jr., a former Vice-President at NBC, and now producer of a major series there, is cordial toward criticism in general. While he deplores the quality of the criticism currently being written, he declares: "Television desperately needs criticism."¹⁸ He goes even further:

The stewards of television's creative potential for entertainment, information, and education are entitled to mature, responsible, informed judgement of their past attempts and their future plans. The public deserves critical writing about television that sheds light and has balance based on adequate knowledge of the problems and capacities of the men engaged in trying to move the medium's imaginative frontiers outwards.¹⁹

It seems obvious that human beings desire the approval and advice of others whom they feel are intelligent and interested. Perhaps this is how criticism came into being, and perhaps it is the justification for its continuing in existence.

If the television critic is needed by someone, how can

¹⁷Black, op. cit., p. 169.

¹⁸Hubbell Robinson, Jr., "Hatchet Men," Saturday Review (March 14, 1959), p. 56.

¹⁹Ibid.

he best fill that need? What must the critic do, and what are some of his problems?

Whenever television critics define their aims, they list three major ends: the elevation of public taste; the stimulation of a demand for better television; and the spurring of network masterminds towards better programming. They seem to take Edward A. Wright's admonition as their springboard: "The reformer who would change the course of the theatre in any of its aspects must first elevate the standards of those who witness the production, for until this powerful group is ready for better dramatic fare, it will not be forthcoming."²⁰

Gilbert Seldes explains: "What we are really trying to do (apart from holding down our jobs) is to instruct public taste."²¹ Stephen H. Schueur, widely syndicated writer of TV Key, and one-time associate director at CBS says: "I sincerely feel that I'm in a position to help raise TV standards."²²

Raising television standards would be accomplished

²⁰Edward A. Wright, A Primer for Playgoers (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1958), p. 4.

²¹Gilbert Seldes, "What We're Up To," Saturday Review (September 7, 1957), p. 26.

²²"Key Critic," Time (July 1, 1957), p. 64.

through the combined strategy of educating public taste and convincing the networks that the public demands better programming. Of this John Crosby says, "It's easy enough to criticize what's on the air, but I think one of the critic's main functions is to stimulate a demand for what isn't."²³

But how does the public respond to such stimulation.

Information on this area is scant and hard to find. A 1953-1955 NBC survey found that "space devoted to TV had increased by 500% in some dailies."²⁴ Newsweek made this statement on the subject:

Across the country such critics as Terrence O'Flaherty . . . Ben Gross . . . Janet Kern . . . Jack O'Brian, and . . . Harriet Van Horne were getting to the reader -- to cascade of 600 letters per week . . .²⁵

But do six hundred letters represent a cascade out of a mass television audience? Can we assume that exposure equals effectiveness? Max Wylie thinks that the television audience "is quite self-sufficient, a law unto itself. . . . Television critics seldom get through to the television audience."²⁶

²³"Out of the Blue," Time (August 20, 1956), p. 71.

²⁴"Big Men on the Papers," Newsweek (April 15, 1951), p. 104.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Max Wylie, Clear Channels (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1955), p. 236.

Jack Gould admits: "I frankly question the influence I have. At best it's an incidental one."²⁷ Janet Kern, too, doubts the effectiveness of simple exposure:

The whole idea of influence is one that I frankly think is a myth. When I get letters asking for my qualifications as a television critic, I have a standing answer. I tell them I have the four necessary qualifications for the job: a television set, a typewriter, a dictionary, and a job on the newspaper.²⁸

In this instance the critic herself does not insist that the critic has any right to influence. And the industry, regarding such a critical attitude would probably be reluctant to accept any criticism, particularly adverse, from this critic. Yet she is listed, whenever critics are discussed, as one of the prominent television critics.

If the critics fail to influence the audience, it may be because of the vast problem of addressing the heterogeneous public. The playwright experienced this in his problem of choosing a language through which to involve the masses in his play. The critic has the added problem of interesting the public in criticism. How can one elevate public taste unless he knows where the level of public taste now stands? How can

²⁷"Measuring the Giant," Time (November 9, 1959), p. 77.

²⁸Ibid, p. 78.

one ever find such a level when the concept of taste is so ethereal, and when the entity, the public, is really a vast series of "publics"?

The critics side with many in the television industry in holding top management responsible for quality lags in television. Jack Gould says: "The people in television are not stupid. They know when they put on a bad show, and usually they know what's wrong with it. One of the critic's functions is to bring to top management the ideas that an underling is not able to bring up from below."²⁹ David Susskind emphasizes the difficulty of reaching the networks' top management when he says: "It's tremendous uphill fight to get good programming on the air -- basically against the network executives."³⁰

But again, the periphery outside the play, outside the program keeps the executives from listening. Speaking of John Crosby and Jack Gould, the two most powerful New York television critics, Newsweek magazine admitted: "The influence of either is, of course, conditioned by the shows' ratings, and the agencies' desire to reach as many persons as possible

²⁹"Big Men on the Papers," op. cit., p. 107.

³⁰Smith, op. cit., p. 166.

at the lowest cost."³¹ Though the complaints of critics sometimes effect a temporary improvement in the volume, not always the quality of public service programming, they more frequently succeed only in arousing the ire of the industry.

RCA Chairman David Sarnoff was once reported to have answered the critics: "We're in the same position as a plumber laying a pipe. We're not responsible for what goes through the pipe."³²

If the responsibility for better television is not accepted by management, it must be taken on by producers and directors whose control over programs is more direct. But producers and directors answer the critics with counter-attacks on the quality of criticism. "Repeatedly in public," David Susskind "has described the fellows who pass judgment on his productions as tasteless, outrageously prejudiced, incompetent and spiteful."³³ Eric Severeid accuses:

. . . television could do with a sharp drop in the quantity of criticism and a sharp rise in its quality. How many writers who haven't read a play since Booth Tarkington's Seventeen are posing as critics of drama?³⁴

³¹"Big Men on the Papers," op. cit., p. 104.

³²Smith, op. cit., p. 162.

³³"Escape from an Ulcer," Newsweek (November 11, 1957), p. 84.

³⁴Eric Severeid, "A Harsh Word for TV Critics," The

Hubbell Robinson, speaking in 1959 from the towers of television's top management, addressed journalism's top managers:

Until publishers and editors extend the ranks of those able to intellectualize as well as to emotionalize or just plain gossip about the medium, its critical fraternity will be held in low repute by those who criticize, ignored by the public whose attention they need as surely as the broadcaster does.³⁵

From his statement we see that Robinson admits, along with the existence of irresponsible critics, the presence of "those who criticize" or a body of real critics. Who the real critics are is difficult to ascertain, but the characteristics of the false critics, probably cousins to Hazlitt's "smatterers of taste," are eloquently defined by spokesmen for the television industry, and even by imprudent "critics" who unwittingly condemn themselves.

Frank Stanton complains:

Immoderation has been more often the rule -- particularly from the intellectuals who delight in blanket charges about television without showing any evidence of ever looking at it. But the whole body of their criticism of television, which I have followed very closely for a decade now, ought to be based on a much sounder acquaintance with the medium in all its phases than it has been in the past.³⁶

Reporter (July 10, 1958), p. 35.

³⁵Robinson, loc. cit.

³⁶Stanton, op. cit., p. 57.

The Scope of the Critic's Jurisdiction

If this discussion seems to have left the realm of pure drama criticism and to have passed over into social criticism and criticism of the whole medium, it follows the path of the drama critic, for in his attempt to interest the heterogeneous audience the critic has often put his emphasis on peripheral problems which will lure the ordinary man toward reading the column. Whereas in pure criticism the critic faced scores of problems, led perhaps by the problem of his own limitations, background, and tastes, he has now added to his responsibilities the problem of deciding whether television as a whole justly reflects our society. When this social criticism occupies the bulk of his critical practice, he ceases to be a drama critic at all, and in many cases is so unspecific as to be uninformative.

At the one pole the critic would have been concerned with arriving at his critical decisions "on the basis of his own background and experience which have made certain phases of the drama take on greater emphasis and importance than others."³⁷ Justifying this would have been his work. He would have had to argue issues like this one put forth by

³⁷Wright, op. cit., p. 61.

J. P. Shanley in America:

It has been said that the devastating bon mot is the reviewer's easy way of avoiding sound analysis of a program he dislikes. But often a cryptic dismissal of this kind is dictated by a conviction that the telecast is so utterly lacking in value as to deserve only a short and sharp rejection.³⁸

But at the other pole, the critic concerns himself with changing television in order to change the world, and the burden of such a self-inflicted task sometimes forces him to regard the mission as hopeless. Max Wylie concluded his thoughts on public taste and television:

We are living in the age of the jerk. But what of it? We have always been living in the age of the jerk. Most people have been "tasteless slob" since their anti-diluvian beginnings. They don't mind it. They don't even know it. They think other people are jerks. I see very little to get excited about regarding the quality of our enthusiasms.³⁹

He ends with the extreme negativist attitude: "It is neither the primary nor the secondary purpose of television to be creative. You take the 'creative' when you can get it, and this is when the creator has it to give."⁴⁰ With this Wylie has reached the critical point of no return. With such an attitude it would be folly to continue in criticism.

³⁸J. P. Shanley, "Television," America (February 1, 1958), p. 523.

³⁹Wylie, op. cit., p. 14.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 238.

Some critics blindly continue the crusade for the best of all possible television worlds; some keep writing in order to "hold down a job"; some perhaps because they have a typewriter, a dictionary and a job on the newspaper. Fortunately, there are a few who say they keep the job in order to criticize drama.

Of all declarations of critical aims by television drama critics those least often named are the ends of (1) describing and evaluating the play in order to increase the enlightenment and enjoyment of the audience, and (2) praising or blaming the creators of the plays. But this, after all, is what criticism was intended for, and this is the chief plea of the industry. Stanton begs for a sounder acquaintance with the medium on the part of the critic. Severeid asks that the critic see the play, pay attention to it, and discuss it accordingly. He complains in situations where he feels that

- (a) the reviewer didn't have even an elementary knowledge of the subject matter, or
- (b) saw only part of the show, or
- (c) wasn't watching if he was listening, or vice versa, or
- (d) was so preoccupied in the egocentric exercise of analyzing his own reactions that he failed to follow the objective reality in front of him⁴¹

For both audience and critic there can be "far greater enjoyment in knowing why a given play or motion picture has or

⁴¹Severeid, op. cit., p. 36.

has not entertained; why the acting or directing has been superior or inferior to the play itself; why the observer had been moved emotionally, or found it dull and uninspired."⁴² And in giving these why's in his criticism, the critic can speak the language of producer and director, and perhaps justify his pleas for better dramatic fare. By letting intellect guide emotion, the critic can hope more validly to praise or blame the writer, producer, actor, and director. John Crosby admits: "I find that I -- and most critics -- are incoherent in our admiration, but afflicted with a formidable coherence when we disapprove."⁴³ An objective rendering of the "why's" will lessen the occurrence of incoherent outbursts. Peter Black explains:

Assessment of performance and of value are matters of opinion, which is why the critic must not only give his opinions but state his case. Criticism that stops short of "because" is worthless, and criticism that supplies its "because" cannot but be valuable.

All critics are at times fatuous, unfair, trivial, inconsequential, and their arguments can be ludicrously wide of the mark. But if their conclusions are reasoned and coherently explained they are never negligible.⁴⁴

Large ends must be attained patiently by thorough

⁴²Wright, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴³John Crosby, "A Low Bow All Around," Out of the Blue (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 290.

⁴⁴Black, op. cit., p. 170.

accomplishment of smaller ends. Frank Stanton sets for television, the task of reflecting "the total nature of our contemporary society: its interests, its values, its aspirations, its methods, customs, follies, myths."⁴⁵ But he recognizes the scope of television's problem:

It cannot stand apart and merely observe and comment or serve solely one group or one level of taste. It is a great mistake for its critics to judge it in terms other than what it must be by its very nature; a medium obliged to serve an extraordinarily heterogeneous society.⁴⁶

If television knows its role, it is perhaps the critic's job then to see how it fulfills each specific part of that role, and to help the audience to see that also. The goals of Edward A. Wright's book, A Primer for Playgoers might well be adopted as the goals of the television critic.

- (1) To help each individual develop for himself an artistically honest standard for evaluating any dramatic production.
- (2) To provide a fairer means of judging the work of all those artists whose efforts are being witnessed.

and through the exercise of these, ultimately

- (3) To build a better audience which will in turn demand a better /televised/ theatre.⁴⁷

In short, the television drama critic can only achieve

⁴⁵Stanton, op. cit., p. 62.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Wright, loc. cit.

his larger ultimate ends through the honest accomplishment of his immediate duties. Again, the advice offered by all the great literary critics to the critics of the present, the declaration of those minimum requirements listed in Chapter One, will answer the critic's problems: that he understand the art he is criticizing; that he view the reality underlying the art with maturity; that he consider the periphery only as it essentially affects the art; that he have a consistent critical method; and that he base his work not on isolated opinions and ideas, but on general critical principles.

CHAPTER IV

TELEVISION CRITICISMS

Let us look at the state of television drama which the critic faces. Though the days have passed when Kraft Theatre, Omnibus, Studio One, Hallmark Hall of Fame, and Playhouse 90 were live and available together, enough drama still exists to provide the critics with a field day. Video-taped or not, Hallmark Hall of Fame, Show of the Month, Producer's Showcase, The Art Carney Specials, Play of the Week, and several new mystery theatres have enriched the season just past with reviewable dramas of hour length or longer. We have had plays from Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Chekhov, Anouilh, O'Casey, and O'Neill. We have had adaptations from Steinbeck, Graham Greene, Edith Wharton, Hemingway, William James, and others, to say nothing of original plays by noted young television playwrights. Television has displayed the acting talents of Sir Laurence Olivier, Christopher Plummer, Maurice Evans, Hugh Griffith, Julie Harris, Ingrid Bergman, and Helen Hayes, among others.

In fact, television has presented plays of such

quality that John Crosby, quoted in a CBS report, said of them: "As far as plays go I feel strongly that television has had more worthwhile dramatic material on it than Broadway has."¹ And while Jack Gould is quick to note that television, like theatre, has its dramatic failures, he credits television with this much: "The people of the nation see more plays in a year than a professional Broadway drama critic."² But can the critic make this exposure to drama more meaningful? How does he contribute his share to the pleasure and enlightenment of the audience? Let us look at a few representative cases to see just what the television critic has been doing.

Reviewing Adaptations from the Theatre

One way to evaluate the professional television drama critic is to compare him with the professional critics of theatre. When a famous theatre play is adapted for television and we have reviews, both of original and adaptation, we have an apt opportunity for such a comparison.

With an adaptation from a stage drama, the television

¹John Crosby, quoted in CBS Report: Free Television and the American People (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1959), p. 6.

²Jack Gould, "Television Today: A Critic's Appraisal," New York Times Magazine (April 8, 1956), p. 13.

critic can expect certain things even before he sees the new play. From his knowledge of the original work he may be able to tell that certain changes will be made to accommodate television camera techniques and to fit television time requirements. He may also be able to predict changes in expression or subject matter necessary because of mass media censorship. He will probably approach the new play with preconceptions and opinions garnered from the old play. At any rate, before he begins he knows pretty well what the television play will be trying to do. With his perspective as a television reviewer, he will try to see how well television is doing it, and whether, for the mass audience, it is worth doing.

The stage critic, too, may use the comparison technique even with a new play. He may compare it with other works of the same author or with other plays of the same type -- or he may criticize from general theory alone. Let us use Hemingway's play, The Fifth Column, to illustrate. When the play was published in book form in 1939, Edmund Wilson reviewed it for The Atlantic. In the course of the review, he traced related themes and characters from several of Hemingway's books to show what was characteristic of the author's writing and thought, explaining these in terms of

Hemingway's life, experiences, and known attitudes -- in short, using the biographical approach. Of the play, Wilson said: " . . . though it is good reading for the way the characters talk," it is "an exceedingly silly production."³ This statement may sound, at first, only pompous, but it does state a consideration basic to understanding Hemingway, and to understanding drama. Hemingway's power lies in his dramatic dialogue, but dialogue does not make drama; it is the dramatic feasibility of situation and character juxtaposition, the possibility for conflict which creates drama. The language, however important, is only the conveyance. Continuing with a discussion of the plot, critic Wilson described the scene in which the hero captures an enemy post, as resembling "a push-over and getaway from one of the cruder Hollywood westerns."⁴ To Wilson, it was an indication of Hemingway's "tendency to indulge . . . puerile fantasies."⁵

In concluding his review, the critic evaluated a major plot element, the romance between hero and heroine by saying: " . . . as he has treated her from the very first

³Edmund Wilson, "Ernest Hemingway: Bourdon Guage of Morale," Atlantic, LXIV (July, 1939), p. 43.

⁴Ibid., p. 44.

⁵Ibid.

scene with considerable frank contempt, the action is rather lacking in suspense as the sacrifice is rather feeble in moral values."⁶

This review, written with the luxury of time to reflect and to consider the other work of Hemingway, allowed at least perspective from which to judge. It lacked only the concentration and impact it would have had as the main feature of a review; here it was only part of a broader look at Hemingway's works.

By 1940, the play reached Broadway in an adaptation by screenwriter Ben Glazer. It had an authoritative billing: Director, Lee Strasberg; leading actors, Franchot Tone, Katherine Locke, and Lee J. Cobb. Stark Young of The New Republic reviewed it in a manner which justified the stiff requirements he had formulated for the critic. His criticism was specific, based on general principles, proceeded from the broad areas of theme and plot to particular considerations in the execution.

He examined the parts which made up the whole drama, stated whether the play was good or bad, and gave credit where credit was due. In his opening remarks, Mr. Young stated his two points of departure: first, that there was a distinction

⁶Ibid.

between dramatic material and the theatric feasibility of it; and second, that a strong performance by the leading actor is a most important enhancement to the play. On the first point he said:

Nearly everyone at times reading some book of Mr. Hemingway's must have noted its dramatic quality and felt it would make good theatre. There is not space to go into the discussion, but only to note that a thing's being highly dramatic does not necessarily mean that it is to that degree theatric. It may in fact be dramatic without being even possible for the stage at all.⁷

He explained how Hemingway's concentration on internal conflicts and psychological struggles make of "the matter of projection . . . a special problem, quite beyond the method and concentration of most of our directors and players."⁸ He described the plot, diagnosing the cause of the weak denouement:

The character may behave as he likes, but the author is expected to see and judge his matter in scale as it were, and with reference to some point of view. And with all this coming overseas to Spain to die for liberty, for its sake giving up marriage, etc., etc., we should get some further definition of what liberty is. Otherwise, what remains is largely gush, or cant, or impotent thinking, or some rehash of adolescent idealism and public vitality.⁹

He compared the writing of Hemingway and Glazer, contrasting clarity and force against "trickiness," and he

⁷ Stark Young, "Mr. Tone and Mr. Hemingway," The New Republic (March 25, 1940), p. 408.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

censured Glazer for "lack of excitement and character."¹⁰

In discussing acting and directing, he explained the difficulty of making a valid critical decision, and while shedding light on how acting and writing support one another, he gave us a little literature of his own:

Many of the play's admirable qualities are so closely bound up with directing and acting that it is practically impossible to distinguish which is which and where the credit most lies. . . . Certainly, this is the case with Mr. Tone, who achieves the finest effects of tenderness -- sudden insight into the quick heart, and conveys to us perfectly that sort of lyrical shock method that the writing employs, and that nostalgia for life -- sweet wings that pass, that pass away.¹¹

In the space of about 1200 words, Stark Young's criticism supplied the reader with at least a coherent impression of both original and adaptation, and with some understanding of the criteria on which the evaluation was based.

A week earlier, Time had reviewed Glazer's adaptation, stating the verdict that Glazer had transformed The Fifth Column from drama into melodrama; had swollen its "psychological conflicts" into "moral crises."¹²

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²"Revamp Till Ready," Time (March 18, 1940), p. 66.

The reviewer summarized the plot briefly:

The play that Hemingway wrote was . . . a picture of wartime Madrid, a tale of a man and his work, a man and his girl. In the end, he simply kicked the girl out and went on working. . . . Most of it was casual. Much of it was real. A good bit of it (in stage terms) was undramatic.¹³

As Time saw it, Glazer's adaptation was a different story, "bulging with high ethical conflicts." To Time's reviewer, one of these conflicts seemed valid:

. . . the struggle in Rawlings [the hero] between the idealism that made him take on a sickening job, and the nausea induced by the job itself. The other conflict -- love v. duty -- is old stage twaddle which adapter Glazer could not bring to life.¹⁴

In stating his opinions, Time's reviewer echoed Stark Young, but his expression was uniquely creative. The review concluded, again contrasting playwright and adapter:

Despite its bold beginning, the love affair is flimsy, vaporous, unreal, nearly sinks the play. Only eloquent rhetoric holds the second half of The Fifth Column together -- and nothing could be less characteristic of Hemingway than eloquent rhetoric.¹⁵

This review, though it took the easier path in considering subject matter without analyzing the production, did offer a penetrating look at what was written. Its

¹³Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

unfortunate feature was that it could have been written after nothing more than a careful reading of the script. But drama is written to be acted and seen.

About the same time, Joseph Wood Krutch reviewed the play for The Nation. Though he concentrated on the structure of the play itself, he commented sufficiently on the staging and acting to indicate that he, at least, had attended. He confined his interest primarily to Glazer's work, though he blamed Hemingway indirectly for some of the play's faults. Like the other critics he was disappointed in Glazer's concentration on the love affair to the detriment of the war theme; he complained that

. . . what had begun as a complex picture of life in a war torn city ends stagily as the love story of a hard boiled hero whose grandiose gestures may be authentic but are too familiar and expected to carry very deep conviction.¹⁶

He censured Glazer for abandoning "a complex and difficult subject for one that is relatively easy and already stereotyped, with the result that the spectator finds his interest declining step by step after the midpoint of the play."¹⁷ He would have preferred that Glazer develop instead

¹⁶Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Fifth Column," The Nation (March 16, 1940), p. 371.

¹⁷Ibid.

the problem of "reconciling the aims of a holy war with the methods which it must inevitably use and with the contrast inevitably apparent between the cause for which one is fighting and the individuals in whose name the cause is fought for."¹⁸

Of the three reviews of Glazer's play, certainly Mr. Young's criticism would have contributed most to the information of the general reader and to the satisfaction of the play's production staff. The other two would have been more interesting to other critics, and to Messrs. Hemingway and Glazer.

Whatever its weaknesses, The Fifth Column has withstood the ravages of time and lapse of memory, for it was revived in 1960 via the television adaptation of A. E. Hotchner. When Hemingway's novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls, became a television sensation and a matter of controversy in 1959, it was decided that the adapter, Hotchner, with Hemingway's endorsement, would re-work several of the author's other books for a special Hemingway series in 1960. The Fifth Column, a drama, was one of these. Starring Richard Burton, Maximilian Schell, and Sally Ann Howes, and directed by John Frankenheimer, it might well have been a newsmaker. But the

¹⁸Ibid., p. 372.

morning after the play, the Boston papers, at least, were full of news on Jack Paar's tirade defending Castro against the newspapers. The new Hotchner adaptation was lost in the shuffle.

One Boston paper, however, had previewed the show on the day previous to broadcast. The Boston Daily Record, using the syndicated TV Key, offered: "The Fifth Column, Ernest Hemingway's drama of life and love during the Spanish Civil war owes much of its effectiveness to the moving performance of Richard Burton." Maximillian Schell's performance was described as "fine," "beautifully played." Frankenheimer's directing was termed "helpful," Elisa Loti's appearance, "striking," and Sally Ann Howes' performance, "satisfactory."¹⁹

This superficial and uninformative preview left the reader to his own devices. If he knew the work of Hemingway, and had seen the acting of Burton or Schell before, he might or might not be anxious to see this play; but certainly little inspiration would have come from this preview.

In New York, the morning after the performance, Sid Bakal and Jack Gould took the trouble to review the play.

Bakal's review opened by calling the production

¹⁹"TV Key," Boston Daily Record (Friday, January 29, 1960), p. 36.

"superb," "electrifying and dynamic television theatre." In a cliché-ridden paragraph, he outlined the plot and evaluated the adaptation:

In recreating the Hemingway classic of life, love and death during the Spanish Civil War, A. E. Hotchner, in a dual capacity of writer and executive producer, succeeded in capturing the hard hitting excitement, realistic brutality, and penetrating sensitivity of men dedicated to a cause in which they believe.²⁰

In this review which reads like an embroidered news release, Bakal fails even to suggest the problems involved in this "dedication to a cause," problems which are central to the play. Far from offering any information about the original or the quality of the adaptation, Bakal's next statement adds to the prattle already taking up column space: "The fact that there were liberties taken with the original work in no way detracted from the dramatic effectiveness of this story of a volunteer American counterspy agent."²¹ This formula sentence leaves the reader with more questions than answers: Where were liberties taken; why? Is it surprising that the changes did not damage the dramatic effectiveness? If there were such a danger, why were the changes made? What is this "work" of Hemingway's? Is it a short story, novel, or play? Bakal never

²⁰Sid Bakal, "TV Review: Electra Playhouse," New York Herald Tribune (January 30, 1960), p. 9.

²¹Ibid.

clarified what this "classic," this "work," this "story" really is. With so little information it is difficult to evaluate his opinions.

Bakal rated the acting "with the best of the season."²² But at that time, in January, the season was not half over. His comments on Sally Ann Howes' performance were perfunctorily appreciative: "Sally Ann Howes delivered a fine perceptive portrayal as the Red Cross doctor who becomes romantically involved."²³ But the comment offers no delineation of the character's nature or problems. She is just a Red Cross doctor, that is all. Bakal winds up his review on a technical note: "The scenic effects and close-up candid camera work were exceptional in this play directed by John Frankenheimer."²⁴ We learn little from the sole qualifying adjective "exceptional" except that Mr. Bakal was impressed. We are in fact denied any real understanding of either Hemingway's play, Hotchner's adaptation, or the production itself. All we know is that the reviewer liked it. For the television professional and for the interested reader, this is not enough.

Jack Gould's review in the Times gave considerably

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

more information on the differences between Hemingway and Hotchner, some information on the characterizations which the actors had to create, some commentary on the strengths and weaknesses in the plot, some technical information, and an idea of the critic's general ideas on television.

In preference to saying there were liberties taken with the original work, Gould stated:

The Ernest Hemingway play, The Fifth Column, was very substantially re-written last night in A. E. Hotchner's adaptation. . . . The main pity was that Mr. Hotchner did not go considerably further.

In its original form, The Fifth Column is a tenuous work, hardly one of Mr. Hemingway's better expositions of a temporary love affair amid the chaos of life near the front lines.²⁵

While from Mr. Bakal's review we learned that "love" and "becoming romantically involved" were included in the plot, we now learn something of the nature of the affair, and of the setting in which it occurred. Mr. Gould enlarges on his first statement:

The story of the American freelance, serving the Spanish Loyalists as a counter espionage agent and the erstwhile Vassar girl who has called more than one man "darling" is a rather elementary bit of narrative. And it does not offer much insight into besieged Madrid when it was beset by informers from within.²⁶

Of the romance, he goes on: " . . . the intense scenes

²⁵ Jack Gould, "The Fifth Column," The New York Times (January 30, 1960), p. 43.

²⁶ Ibid.

rooted in the premise of today we live, tomorrow we die were also fairly predictable and routine."²⁷ Gould suggests, in fact, that Hotchner's adaptation should have developed, instead, the counter espionage element of the plot, and should have capitalized on "the feeling of impending disaster at the hands of the unseen enemy," making it more "forbidding" and less "melodramatic."²⁸ This suggestion follows the 1940 criticisms on the same problem which adapter Glazer had failed to resolve.

As Gould reaches the end of his column space, he begins to sacrifice depth to necessity: sketchily he describes the performances of Burton and Miss Howes as "competent but without electricity," and Maximillian Schell's performance was termed "effective, though awkward placement of the microphone on occasion made him hard to understand."²⁹

In contrast to Bakal's praise of special camera effects, is Gould's opinion that Frankenheimer's directing was "somewhat overly concerned with vivid pictorial composition."³⁰ Gould makes this judgment on the general artistic

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

criterion that no device is good which calls attention to itself.

Of the three television reviews, Gould's, which reads like a thoughtful capsule version of Young's play critique, is a piece of criticism. It offers the most information and inspires the most confidence in the critic's intelligence and sincerity.

Reviewing Adaptations from the Narrative

Among the problems in adapting a novel or short story for television is the need for discarding the narrative form and producing a new dramatic form which will somehow retain the distinctive mood of the original. With stream-of-consciousness stories and with descriptive narratives, the problems become especially acute. In the case of a novel, there is the necessity for tightening and paring characterizations and situations. Knowing this, the critic can guess, before he sees the adaptation, how it will most likely depart from the original. When television announced, in 1958, a presentation of Thornton Wilder's Bridge of San Luis Rey, the urgency of the adaptation problems was immediately apparent.

The novel, Wilder's second, had been introduced in 1927, and became a best-seller. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the critics greeted it with reserve. And

despite that, the book won a Pulitzer Prize.

Edmund Wilson, in a rather scholarly article, discussed the author in terms of this book. The critic praised Wilder for "delightfulness" along with "a hardness, a sharpness, a precision "

He has an edge which is peculiar to himself and which is never incompatible with a consummate felicity. . . . Wilder gives his Peru a solidity, an incandescence and a distinctiveness of outline, which we should never have thought possible.³¹

(Wilson was referring to the fact that Thornton Wilder had never been to Peru.)

Critic Wilson discussed the significance of the relationships between the people who fell with the bridge and the people who were left alive, and between all these people and God. He probed the theme, seeking the mind of the author, and in so doing evaluated both Wilder and his work:

The real higher power at work here is Mr. Wilder's esthetic form which is struggling to incarnate itself; the God who broke the bridge is only a masquerading prophet. Wilder's real emotions and ideas have not come fully to the surface -- they have not yet fully identified themselves with his peculiar style and form to bring forth his peculiar kind of beauty.³²

The review was cerebral enough to discourage the casual reader but offered food for thought and argument among the

³¹Edmund Wilson, "Thornton Wilder," The New Republic (August 8, 1929), p. 304.

³²Ibid.

interested. Perhaps in this review Wilson was "Playing the critic's game."³³

Time magazine printed a hasty review of the book soon after it came out. Beginning with a cursory glance at the plot, the reviewer rushed his column to a close with:

The delicacies of Author Wilder's prose cannot be intimated in so rude a summary of the material of his book, which will be acceptable, like his first novel, The Cabala, mainly to those who are sophisticates in both life and letters.³⁴

At best, the review is uninspired.

After six months on the stands, the novel was mentioned again in Outlook as "one of those rare best-sellers against which the voice of depreciation has not once been raised. Its very excellences made those who are supposed to be able to anticipate success distrustful of its sales possibilities."³⁵

Among its excellences were its descriptive prose, at once strong and delicate, and its complex and vivid delineation of character. Since the book had undergone two bad film adaptations and would now, in Dupont's version, face its

³³ John Macy, "The Critical Game," Contemporary American Criticism, ed. James Cloyd Bowman (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1926), p. 265.

³⁴ "San Luis Rey," Time (December 5, 1927), p. 47.

³⁵ Harry Salpeter, "Why Is A Bestseller?" Outlook (April 15, 1928), p. 634.

largest potential audience, the critics would be concerned how much those "excellences" would be sacrificed.

Newsweek reported Thornton Wilder's own fear about television and his novel. Of television, Wilder said:

. . . I am not quite sure it is an art form. The entire entertainment business is like a vast river flowing forward. It stems from the universal appetite of people to see and sample as much of what goes on around them in this world as possible. TV seems to be the newest stretch in the river. But I have yet to decide about the value of TV drama. If The Bridge turns out to be wonderful, that might be enough to make up my mind.³⁶

With such a test declared, David Susskind and company set about producing the play, probably convinced, with Wilder, that the story had "general appeal."³⁷ As Wilder put it:

It is all question mark. Why are certain people the victims of a common catastrophe, a plane crash or a train wreck? Where did they come from? Where are they going? It is a problem that fascinates us from the age of 12 on.³⁸

While Wilder's view of his work made it seem modest and unassuming, the problems of adapting it for television were far from modest. Robert Lewis Shayon, in Saturday Review, had this to say:

It would seem courageous, perhaps even audacious for

³⁶"The Bridge on TV," Newsweek (January 20, 1958), p. 46.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

a live television program to undertake a dramatic adaptation of Thornton Wilder's novel. It measures only 34,500 words - a mere preface by the gargantuan standards of contemporary best sellers. But the real challenge lies in retaining something of the enchanting power of the author's urbane, poignant, stoic narrative.³⁹

Coming right to the point, Shayon continued: "The recent CBS-TV Dupont Show of the Month version which we are here considering scrapped Mr. Wilder's tempered, classic prose entirely."⁴⁰

Even at such sacrifice, the production was, for Mr. Shayon, an "unusual, first-rate television drama;" credit for this was traced chiefly to its being live rather than on film. Doing it live took more talent, discipline, and concentration both technically and artistically, Shayon thought, and paid off in immediacy and excitement.⁴¹

Shayon praised adapter Ludi Claire:

. . . for organizing effectively this complicated tale of five eighteenth century persons who died in the sudden collapse of a crude bridge over a deep gorge near Lima. It was no small achievement to make playing scenes out of the episodic tangle of relationships, even if the characters were simplified in most cases, at the cost of a clear understanding of their motivations and depth.⁴²

³⁹Robert Lewis Shayon, "Live from New York," Saturday Review (February 15, 1958), p. 29.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

Shayon commented explicitly on each actor's work, and stated a television principle in his praise of director Robert Mulligan: "It was fortunate that he was chosen to direct 'The Bridge' on TV, for he works in terms of people, not cameras."⁴³ He gave his reasons, too, for liking the scene design: "The scenery was excellent, suggesting to the eye much of the quality of Peru's elegant and sophisticated eighteenth century Spanish American culture."⁴⁴ In this commentary we find a concept important to theatre as it is to all art -- the concept of imitation by suggestion, rather than by duplication.

After discussing the specific differences between original and adaptation, after evaluating explicitly and concisely the parts which contributed to the whole production, Shayon concluded with a general declaration of the play's power and an evaluation of what television did to bring it uniquely alive:

If you failed to get the human beings groping toward each other for love -- failing, suffering, and rising again to reach for it on another level -- you gained nothing of value from "The Bridge". . . . The novel gave us Thornton Wilder's style and instinct. Television, in its adaptation, could hope at best to offer, at close range, the people and their passions. This "The Bridge" did.⁴⁵

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

In his review, then, Mr. Shayon showed us what television was trying to do, gave us his opinion of how well it was done, and how well worth doing it was.

Time magazine, with more than a week to reflect on the play, printed a perceptive, scholarly, and creative critique on February 3, 1958. Its opening paragraph was pleasingly informative:

As a renewer of old treasure, rather than a maker of new molds, Thornton Wilder found in a one-act play by Prosper Merimée the seed of an idea for his second novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey. . . . Its prose was clean and classical, its characters adroitly limned and it was constructed with the delicacy of a motet. But it was essentially a tour de force, and Wilder's publishers were surprised at its runaway success.⁴⁶

Exercising its reportorial function, Time added a new note to its evaluation of the theme as interpreted by television:

As produced for CBS by David Susskind, The Bridge was cliffs-above-average for TV, but it still creaked of banality, of too many artificial characters acting intensely about too little. And it completely missed Wilder's mockery of Calvinist theory and his "animal repudiation of my father's notion that what happens to you is a series of express prizes and punishments from a minutely attentive, scorekeeping God."⁴⁷

Time's critique of the acting was lively and metaphorical:

⁴⁶"Review: Bridge of San Luis Rey," Time (February 3, 1958), p. 64.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 66.

As the perichole (half-breed bitch), Viveca Lindfors munched off the scenery with her "razor tongue" until the pox dulled her cutting edge and brought pathos to the role. Judith Anderson played the mad fatuous marquesa in a style that would have fit nicely into the theatre but came a little floridly into the living room. . . . Only Eva Le Galliene's abness managed to imbue the production with some of the pretty metaphysics of the original. . . . Then a few seconds before the final curtain, Actress Le Galliene effectively recited the Beatitudes, tacked on by Adapter-Actress Ludi Claire.⁴⁸

Again, bolstering its critique with direct quotes from the author, Time concluded:

Wilder himself took mild exception to what TV had wrought. "The addition of the Beatitudes is a crossing of the t's and a dotting of the i's," he said afterwards. "I prefer understatement." Of the show itself: "The book has a lighter tone. On TV there was too much concentration of misery. They caught the theme but not the tone of the book." Wilder's interpretation of the theme: "Love is an energy which exists of itself. It has its own value."⁴⁹

Both Time and The Saturday Review, in turning out these specific, engrossing reviews, had the advantage of a little time to consider the task. The newspaper critics, on the other hand, worked under pressure. Jack Gould, writing in the New York Times, gave a hasty review which, if unimpassioned, was at least informative. What resulted was a rather prosaic account dotted with occasional stabs of perception -- purple patches undoubtedly arising from Mr.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

Gould's informed substratum.

His review read, in substance:

"The Bridge of San Luis Rey," Thornton Wilder's philosophical novel on the lesson of love for those who survive the dead was adapted for television last night in a stunning production that included performances by Eva Le Galliene and Judith Anderson. . . .

The play was adapted by Miss Ludi Claire, who overcame formidable dramatic obstacles in imbuing Mr. Wilder's work with theatrical cohesion.

Miss Anderson had the largest part as the Marquesa de Montmayor. Hers was a portrayal of masterly depth; the loneliness, selfishness, drunkenness and despair of the woman were all realized. Her final scene with the little Pepita, her companion, in which she learns the meaning of selfless love just before going on the bridge, had a moving majesty.

Miss Le Galliene played Madre Maria, Abbess of the Convent, who lost several of her dearest friends in the bridge disaster. It was she who spoke Mr. Wilder's closing lines that the link between the living and the dead is the bridge of love. Her recital of the Beatitudes, which were added in the television adaptation, was unforgettable.

Viveca Lindfors was perhaps excessively flamboyant in her opening scenes as Camila, the actress. But after Camila's fateful interview with the Marquesa and her subsequent loss of beauty, Miss Lindfors was touching and real.⁵⁰

By the end of the review Mr. Gould had some interesting things to say but his unexciting vocabulary made them matter of fact:

Hume Cronyn portrayed Uncle Pio, the wily, if dedicated theatre manager, a part very considerably reduced in the adaptation. His interpretation understandably was a shade sketchy and episodic.⁵¹

⁵⁰Jack Gould, "TV: Stunning Production," The New York Times (January 22, 1958), p. 55.

⁵¹Ibid.

After adding a few dutiful credits, Mr. Gould concluded:

Robert Mulligan's direction was extremely sensitive and deft. The settings were lavish in detail but never intrusive.

Mr. Susskind deserves full thanks for undertaking an exacting theatre assignment and making it materialize beautifully.⁵²

While Mr. Gould's criticism considered production problems, examined the parts that made up the whole, and told the good from the bad, his review was too limpid to provoke reaction; it failed even to fulfill Huneker's sole requirement that a critic hold our attention. The review was perhaps an illustration of the point that a critic, no matter how experienced, cannot, like the show that must go on, write every review well. As British critic Peter Black says: "Reluctance will always be a danger as long as critics have to write too much and too often . . ."⁵³

Elizabeth Driscoll of the Boston Globe managed a review difficult to match in the matter of substituting adjectives for thinking. While she recognized that many elements work in harmony to produce an effective and unified play, her discussion of those elements told us nothing except

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Peter Black, "Criticism in Television," Television in the Making, ed. Paul Rotha (New York: Focal Press, 1956), p. 169.

that the reviewer was duly impressed with the surface excellences of the play. Everything was wonderful, she began:

The standards are set . . . high and early. Last night's CBS presentation of the Pulitzer Prize winner The Bridge of San Luis Rey was virtually flawless.

Dupont's Show of the Month with its hour and a half format set a standard for "specials" this coming year which will be hard to match.⁵⁴

After lumping all the cast members together under the banner, "impeccable," she went on bathetically,

Thornton Wilder's prize winning novel has been legend but there are those who confessed "they never got much out of it." It's safe to say that if they watched last night's performance the meaning of man's need for his fellow men and for the love which comes from outside himself was abundantly apparent.⁵⁵

Before producer and director came the carpenter: "It took 28 sets, 100 craftsmen and 13 trucks to put on this show, and it was worth every technicality,"⁵⁶ Miss Driscoll exclaimed, uncovering the effort behind the art which artists always conceal, and which critics usually reserve for its proper place. Putting the local news ahead of the critique she went on: "New Bedford's Bob Wade, who studied at Boston University and the Cambridge School of Drama, was production designer and we have a feeling that he can clear off his mantel to make room

⁵⁴ Elizabeth W. Driscoll, "TV Notebook: A Flawless Bridge," The Boston Globe (January 22, 1958), p. 39.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

for the eventual awards right now."⁵⁷

At last, Miss Driscoll was ready to evaluate the production:

In any production as intensely dramatic as this, one flaw, one slip, one out-of-key motion can dissipate the mood. There was no such flaw.

Judith Anderson as the drunken marquesa was magnificently tragic; Eva Le Galliene as Madre Marie commanded every set she appeared on; Viveca Lindfors as the actress, La Perichole, outdid anything she's ever attempted before, to our way of thinking, and Cronyn and Steven Hill were right on a par with the rest.⁵⁸

Abandoning superlatives for a moment, she dispenses with the adaptation in blanket fashion: "Oddly, but suitably enough, an actress, Ludi Claire, wrote the 90 minute script and she did a handsome job."⁵⁹

Her remarks on the setting seemed, at best, naive: "The setting was eighteenth century Peru and each scene looked real . . . heavy doors closed with an authentic sound and the grillework looked massive and right (it really was wrought iron, no fakery at all)."⁶⁰

Offering her general impression, she said: "But all the particulars become evident only in a deliberate post-

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

mortem. The production was so geared that everything, even the star performances, were simply parts of a great story which came alive in the expert telling."⁶¹

Finally, she raised her critical pen in benediction:

These are the places where television shines. When TV puts its mind and considerable (and expensive) talents to doing a proper job it can stand along with any other entertainment medium, right on the top.
Last night TV was a wonder child.⁶²

The Herald Tribune's Marie Torre presented an uneven review the morning after the presentation. It opened with contained eloquence and a consciousness of both good and bad in the production. The ambitious setting which had so impressed Miss Driscoll provoked the opposite reaction from Miss Torre:

A forceful, brooding adaptation of Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize play, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," was presented on Dupont's Show of the Month last night. Artistically, the production attained moments of excellence and offered a veritable field day for the participating actors. As TV entertainment it was a strangely hypnotic endeavor, if not stirring or spell-binding.

In retrospect, the broad scope of the project, the innumerable sets (twenty-eight, all told), the huge cast, proved too much of a challenge for the space and time limitations of television with the result that the production had uneven and talky periods.⁶³

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Marie Torre, "The Bridge of San Luis Rey," New York Herald Tribune (January 22, 1958), section 2, p. 5.

Tolerating such contradictions as enumerating the "innumerable," the critic or professional theatre worker would ask, at least, justification for this last comment. But the reviewer goes on to other considerations, all the time slipping into mediocrity both in perceptiveness and expression. The criticism of the script is perfunctory and inconclusive:

The script, which deserved an "A" for effort, adhered as much as was possible to the original story of the bridge that collapsed in eighteenth century Peru and the five persons who fell with it. The effective climax was executed with care and made for high drama.⁶⁴

Even the critic sounds unconvinced of his closing remarks:

The calibre of the performance was first-rate throughout. Judith Anderson in particular, was outstanding in a scene with Viveca Lindfors in which she summoned all the artistry at her command to communicate her humility. It was a tour de force for Miss Anderson. Space doesn't permit individual accolades for the entire cast . . . but they all emerged as the true professionals they are.⁶⁵

Variety used the play as the departure-point for a practical observation on network rehearsal procedures. While a review which is concerned with the periphery of drama, chiefly, and for itself, and which mentions the play only in passing cannot be acknowledged as criticism, it is often effective and justified in a trade paper which does not here

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

profess or attempt to present dramatic criticism. In praising Dupont for permitting "Talent Associates to nurse and rehearse a dramatic offering for weeks or even months to achieve a perfection comparable to a Broadway stage production," the review hoped to advance this practice as "the corrective measure for TV drama's last stand," -- to make it the "definitive pattern, in place of the trifles dished out on a weekly basis."⁶⁶

Reviewing Original Dramas

But adaptations from well known works could be expected to receive serious attention in the press. Daily criticisms of daily dramas are a better measure of the consistent practices of reviewers. When a critic must review a new play, with no precedent to guide him but his critical theory and his knowledge of what can be demanded from a television play, he stands a good chance of judging the drama by criteria appropriate to television. As Mary Crozier, critic for the Manchester Guardian, put it: ". . . if broadcasting is a new art, it has already built some traditions; it has done memorable things, and each one has

⁶⁶"The Bridge of San Luis Rey," Variety (January 29, 1958), p. 35.

set a mark by which others can be measured. . . . "67

Rod Serling's Requiem For A Heavyweight set such a mark, winning the Emmy as best play of its year. Because it made news as Serling's second Emmy winner in a row, it is remembered, along with Patterns, whenever memorable television dramas are discussed. But when it was produced, Requiem was just another play. Enhanced though it was by its author's reputation, it received a sane welcome by the critics.

Jack Gould wrote an appreciative but uneven review the morning after the play; he began with an emotional interpretation of the script:

"Requiem for a Heavyweight," by Rod Serling, presented last night on "Playhouse 90," was a play of overwhelming force and tenderness. It was an artistic triumph that featured a performance of **indescribably** poignancy by Jack Palance in the part of the inarticulate has-been of the prize ring.

Mr. Serling wrote a searing, inspired indictment of the worst side of the prize fight game, the greedy mortals who live off the flesh and blood of helpless youths who want to be champions. His play depicted the utter brutality and inhumanity of a so-called sport that can leave men in the wreckage of their own punch drunk double talk.⁶⁸

Briefly, Mr. Gould outlined the plot, stopped to reflect on the climax in which the defeated fighter starts

⁶⁷Mary Crozier, Broadcasting: Sound and Television (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 200.

⁶⁸Jack Gould, "TV: Requiem For A Heavyweight," The New York Times (October 12, 1956), p. 59.

teaching a young boy about boxing:

The climax may have been a little obscure. It could have been interpreted that in helping the youth the fighter had found himself. Or that for some pugilists, there never is an escape from the ring. Either way, Mr. Serling's play had immense power and poetry and is certain to win many a prize.⁶⁹

Mr. Gould next described the "indescribable" acting of Jack Palance:

Mr. Palance contributed a brilliant interpretation of the fighter; he projected the man's incoherence and bewilderment with a superb regard for details. To the huge and scar-ridden boxer he imparted a glowing and tragic humanness.⁷⁰

But his commentary on the other roles was half-thoughtful, half-mechanical.

Ed Wynn, in his debut in a straight drama, was very good as the second who put a man's pride before the purse. His son, Keenan Wynn, playing the ruthless manager was not quite so successful; he seemed neither smooth nor mean enough to be entirely convincing. Maxie Rosenbloom had several good scenes as the reigning monarch of the babbling hangers-on in a saloon patronized by former fighters.⁷¹

His conclusion filled the column space neatly: "Mr. Serling and Mr. Palance contributed a notable evening of theatre last night on Channel 2."⁷²

Time magazine took the play as an indication that

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

television drama was "at last coming of age." After a brief but powerful recap of the plot, the review made a unique contribution to our understanding of the play by exercising its reportorial function. It supplied us with the key to interpreting the play by quoting the author's intention:

He did not intend, he says, for Requiem simply to daub tar and feathers on the fight game. "I tried to dramatize the rejection of a human being by a segment of society. It could have been played out against any background at all."⁷³

The play that inspired Jack Gould and satisfied Time magazine the morning after, was condemned a week later in the pages of Variety. Accusing the author of "padding" the script, Variety's reviewer said:

Serling had a powerful story to tell, but to fill those 90 minutes, he dragged it from one climax to another and finally ended it with a dissipated and after-the-fact ending that all but went through the ABC's in spelling out his point.

In the last 20 minutes, there were two ideal endings, either of which could have given the story a strong sense of impact, but were succeeded by more fill.⁷⁴

To justify such an accusation, Variety should have gone through its own ABC's by identifying the two ideal endings, for the information of critics and writers who would doubtless

⁷³"The Biggest Playhouse," Time (October 22, 1956), p. 87.

⁷⁴"TeleFollow Up Comment," Variety (October 17, 1956) p. 32.

have argued.

Sounding like a page out of What Makes Sammy Run, the reviewer went on:

With all its faults -- mainly that of being overwritten and overrepetitive, Serling's yarn had a basic ring of truth and power to it, and as enacted by a cast headed by Jack Palance, had more than its share of moments of strength and poignancy. Palance did the finest acting job he's yet turned in in any medium, socking across the genuine bewilderment, inferiorities, but straightforward decency and pride of a boxer who's learned that he's washed up but doesn't know anything else than the ring.

Call it the grunt'n'groan school of acting, but Palance's stuttering and stumbling characterization is easily the best of the new season and one of the alltime television greats.⁷⁵

After giving standard approval to other members of the cast -- except to Kim Hunter who seemed "slightly out of place and character" -- Variety concluded: "With this kind of cast and what might have been a solid script, it's too bad the show played itself out at the two-thirds mark."⁷⁶

That such a failure won the Emmy for that year speaks badly either for the year, for the Television Academy, or for Variety's reviewer.

The Memorable Review

It is unfortunately true that some reviewers con-

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

sistently perpetrate abysmally dull and uninformed reviews on the public. On the other hand, even respected critics, at times, grow tired. But the instances are common when reviews come along -- quietly, without fanfare -- to comfort the discouraged producer, the hardworking actor, and the persevering reader. Reviews like Terrence O'Flaherty's column on the television version of Misalliance, conceal some sturdy principles in one energetic paragraph:

A sparkling 90 minutes, demonstrating that even a great playwright can profit by editing. They ended up with a classical comedy of a kind that is not being written these days, alas, or performed. It required that the viewer bring something to the play other than a full stomach and a comfortable chair.⁷⁷

We have versatile reviewers like John Crosby who will expend the effort necessary to enrich a review with something of himself. His 1951 review of Amahl and the Night Visitors is a case in point. It was based on an appreciation of harmony and simplicity, of multiteity in unity, of the periphery which surrounds a production. Its richness flowed from the reviewer's concentration, and from his knowledge of music and art. Crosby opened his review with a compliment to composer Menotti's "simplicity and integrity of purpose in dealing

⁷⁷Terrence O'Flaherty, quoted in Television, XVIII, No. 4 (April, 1960), p. 67.

with fundamental emotions, fundamental human needs."⁷⁸ He praised him for writing about them "with terrifying directness."⁷⁹

It's the sort of story that could have been drenched in sentimentality, and Menotti, because he is unabashed by the outer trappings of sentiment, because he writes directly about mother love, about poverty, about crutches, about miracles, somehow purifies them and transforms them into genuine and profound emotion.⁸⁰

After explaining how music and drama can be related, Crosby showed how Menotti blended them with subtlety and taste:

He can hardly write a line of music which doesn't seem exactly suited to the particular moment of the drama, inflaming the mind and heart simultaneously and intensifying the dramatic effect to an almost unbearable degree.⁸¹

He noted how the staging and lighting were appropriate to this Christmas opera by comparing them with the Flemish painting, "The Adoration of the Magi," with "its composition, its opulence, its rather earthy reverence."⁸² He discussed the talent of the performers and the accomplishment of the producer. Of the total effect he concluded simply: ". . .

⁷⁸ John Crosby, "A Low Bow All Around," Out of the Blue (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 227.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁸² Ibid.

everyone who saw it was a little better as a person and as a Christian than he was an hour earlier."⁸³ He later admitted that the column "took hours. My admiration for this work was so boundless that it struck me dumb."⁸⁴

With this remark he indicated one thing that this investigation uncovered, if it accomplished nothing else: good criticisms do not come about easily. It is with increased appreciation that we can read reviews like the beautiful column on Costigan's Little Moon of Alban as it appeared in Time. Here was an informed criticism that told us television was doing something simple and beautiful, was doing it well, and was making it worthwhile; and it told much more.

In its first original play of its five years of faithful adaptations, the Peabody Award winning Hallmark Hall of Fame rose to a level rare in the theatre and rarer yet on TV. The drama: Little Moon of Alban, a lyrical consecration of love and faith by young (30) Playwright-Actor James Costigan.

Little Moon's Irish heroine, embroiled in the "troubles" of 1916-21, felt her faith in God shaken when the English occupiers killed her father, brother, and betrothed. She sought refuge as a Roman Catholic Sister of Charity, was soon assigned to nurse the Englishmen who had destroyed her world. In a Dublin hospital she found another man whom she could have loved: a vehemently cynical British soldier, so badly wounded that death seemed sure to overtake him in his bitter atheism and -- her hope of finding her salvation by effecting his.

. . . In less capable hands than Playwright Costigan's Little Moon might have been eclipsed by the maudlin

⁸³Ibid., p. 228.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 290.

religiosity that afflicts showmen on rare visits to church. Costigan told his mystic-tinged love story with subtlety, taste, and poetic fervor. His unloving lovers were Julie Harris, no stranger to theatrical heights, and Christopher Plummer, the Toronto-born actor who did as well for Costigan as he usually does for Shakespeare. His director was Hall of Fame's skilled George Schaefer. But the playwright had mostly himself to thank for the story, in which the lovers were parted to take divergent paths. It was as if a theologian-poet had rewritten A Farewell to Arms, replacing bodies with souls.⁸⁵

The review finished with a history of Costigan's career, showing how his "dismal years as a Broadway stage hopeful" helped turn him into a television playwright; how he prepared himself for the Hall of Fame adaptations of Cradle Song and The Lark.

But Little Moon, exuberantly greeted by most U. S. TV critics last week, seemed to mark a big upturn in Costigan's career. In it he grappled compassionately with "those forces in life that make it difficult or impossible," qualified as the kind of writer once described by Pascal in a line that Costigan likes to quote: "I most admire those writers who tell with tears in their eyes what men do to other men."⁸⁶

Here was a review which would have satisfied Aristotle's requirement that the critic understand the art he is criticizing; Eliot's demand that the critic show intelligence and maturity; Wordsworth's ideal that the critic, like the artist, work with his imagination; Shaw's demand that the

⁸⁵"Compassionate Young Man," Time (April 7, 1958), p. 66.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 69.

critic respect the artist's style and that he get his facts right; Lawrenson's demand for depth and vocabulary; a newsman's demand for news; and certainly, Huneker's demand that the critic hold our attention. Time's review answers yes on both counts: "Be as profound as you please, but be pleasing."⁸⁷

/To put it concretely, a good piece of television dramatic criticism should analyze the play's content, that is, tell us what happened in the play and what it should mean to the viewer. Then it should evaluate the performance, taking into account the producing, directing, acting, set design, and any special effects that were important. These qualities would be common to any good drama review whether for stage, screen, or television.

A good television critic must know, in addition, the distinctive characteristic of television. He must know what the electronic possibilities of television are, what special visual effects are feasible, and how limitations of time and space weigh in a production. He should have some knowledge of problems in accomodating camera work, lighting, and settings to the size of the television screen. He must be aware of problems like censorship and sponsorship which influence the

⁸⁷ James Huneker, "Introduction," Dramatic Opinions and Essays with an Apology by Bernard Shaw (New York: Brentano's, 1907), I, p. x.

play before the audience ever gets to see it.

And of course the good television critic must be acutely aware of the audience, made up of millions of individuals with as many differing interests and tastes. The critic must understand the problems involved in bringing to such an audience plays which will appeal universally, which can be understood by all, and yet which must challenge each man who sits in front of that twenty-one inch screen.

Though the critic may not necessarily express all of these things in every review, he must know them and take them into account. For from the critic's awareness of all television's problems and potentialities comes his ability not only to say what a production was, but what it might have been.

CHAPTER V

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter One opened with definitions of criticism by Eliot, Winters, and La Driere, expressing the views of the New Criticism which combines textual and scientific method criticism. With critical evaluation rather than subjective enthusiasm as its end, the new criticism stresses chiefly the value of a rational critique to support the critic's reaction to a work of art, and the importance of a method or process of criticizing so that the reactions of the critic, even personal and highly subjective reactions, may be structured and orderly. The process does not limit the enthusiasm of the personal reaction but it does delimit the area in which the personal reaction is accepted as evaluation. It stresses the facts by describing the content, but allows for the addition of relevant knowledge in all areas which enrich the evaluation.

In reviewing the history of criticism, we discussed definitions; theories, both classical and romantic; and approaches, historical, biographical, and textual; concluding

that the work itself should be examined first, and that the other two approaches be applied where significant. We discussed critical attitudes, primarily objective and relative, as they derived from Classicism and Romanticism, and we exposed the weaknesses of relativism. We discussed methods and principles, opposing analysis and organic sensibility. Though the major tenets of Classicism and Romanticism were irreconcilable, certain broad critical criteria could be drawn from both to be practiced in the same critique. From all the schools, we extracted compatible criteria for the critic: the prerequisites of understanding, maturity, dedication, a sense of reality, and a grasp of essentials.

But after reviewing the schools of criticism from Classicism to the present, we saw that scientific method, demanding structured analysis but allowing for impressionism, embodies at least in theory, the best of the other schools without their blind spots and limitations.

The chapter closed by posing a question: Can or does television criticism employ the criteria set forth in the history of literary criticism?

But the history of literary criticism is characterized by the relative leisure and perspective in which it is practiced. For a more sympathetic understanding of the nature and problems

of television dramatic criticism, and for a view of a more closely allied practice, theatre criticism was next examined in the thesis. The scope and elusiveness of modern drama were first discussed as hindrances to the formulation of a critical process. Simple approaches to formulating a process were listed; for example, the approach from what the author is trying to do, to whether he did it well, and whether it was worth doing. This approach leaves itself open to a good deal of unrestrained romanticism. Nevertheless, in its simple way, it suggests a process.

This thesis does not attempt to say exactly what process should be used universally but only that each critic should formulate for himself a process which he would follow consistently.

A more palatable process is suggested by a combination of aims espoused by prominent critics of theatre. Bentley's demand that the critic tell whether a play is good or bad is a return to the simple attention to the work of art itself first practiced by Aristotle and now recommended by textual critics. The admonition put forth by Bentley and Nathan that the critic look at theatre in all its parts calls for analysis, another classical principle also employed by scientific method. This admonition suggests that theatre

criticism may be more complex than literary criticism because theatre embodies much more than just the written word. A major point arises from this observation -- the point that analysis of theatre in all its parts, that is, technical criticism must accompany simple criticism of subject matter. Whatever method is employed must include this much if the criticism is to be more than just a review.

At this point it might be well to state parenthetically that it is allowable in some cases that the pressure of time precludes the accomplishment of anything better than a review, but the insistence of some journalists that they be called reviewers rather than critics indicates their reluctance to accept the challenge of criticism. If they must comment on a play, it might just as well be with authority.

As by-products of this examination in quest of a method, the chapter treats the nature of the sophisticated theatre audience and the rapport established by tradition between the theatre audience and the critic. It examines the mental habits and general training of the critic necessary before he attempts to solidify his ideas or to formulate his process.

Arguments that the critic need only be pleasing or have an informed sub-stratum of taste from which to work are

discounted. For the weight of commentary in this chapter makes it necessary to conclude that direct discipline and a method are necessary, because as scientific method points out, evaluation is the end of criticism -- not subjective enthusiasm however pleasing, however intelligent.

Chapter Three establishes at the outset the distinct problems of television and television criticism; first that they have no tradition of their own, and secondly that they address themselves to a heterogeneous audience. Out of the difficulty in appraising audience needs, the question of the critic's role arises. Our discussion of it reaches the conclusion that the critic is needed by the industry as the sole coherent voice of public reaction, and by the audience as the expert measure of each man's private opinion,

The critic's attention to peripheral areas: the commercialism of television, ratings, and agency aims, the transience of television events, and the social effects of television, obscures his view of immediate duties. Because he must serve many levels of taste and because he is usually expected to review all television features, not just drama, the critic fails to regard the adoption of a critical process as one of his most pressing needs. But the chapter concludes, the critic is frustrated in his broad attempts to build a more

demanding and appreciative audience because he does not fulfill the initial duty of providing the audience with specific means for evaluating television features. Drama would be one of the best areas for defining such means.

Chapter Four illustrates the conclusions of Chapter Three with regard to drama criticism. It is a practical analysis of specific television criticisms and reviews which shows how adherence to method, combined with the proper application of relevant knowledge and the enrichment of informed taste make the difference between great criticism and mediocre reviewing.

The chapter examines reviews of adaptations so that the reader may in some cases compare the depth and concentration of literary reviews with the comparative haste and superficiality of television reviews. On other cases, the significance of the depth criticisms found in television reviews can be evaluated when the problems are highlighted through comparison. Several reviews are offered for each play so that a variety of approaches may be seen and evaluated. The question raised in Chapter One as to whether the television critic can fulfill the demands made by literary criticism is answered by illustration in the discussion of The Memorable Review. The television critic can and does meet the demands of literary

criticism and the specialized demands of drama criticism when he describes the play itself in specific terms, when he applies his knowledge of related areas where relevant, when he evaluates his own evaluation thereby giving the enrichment of imagination and the safeguard of reason to his critique, and when he criticizes not from an isolated point of view but from general principles.

Recommendations

As Chapter Four illustrates, television critics can and do write effective criticism, but inadequate reviews are sufficiently prevalent to have caused concern within the television industry and in critical circles. In 1959, the Fund for the Republic sponsored a report on the relationship between the industry and the critic in the hope of discovering the cause for their mutual dissatisfaction, but the report was abandoned. The author, Pat McGrady, wrote a distillation of his projected report for Variety and called it "The TV Study That Nobody Saw." Though the distillation did not cover the area outlined in the original conception of the report, it did offer certain recommendations which are worth considering.

Mr. McGrady, following Hubbell Robinson's lead,¹

¹Robinson, supra, p. 66.

recommended that publishers take the first step by placing the right man in the right job, by hiring only qualified critics for the critic's position and then by giving them freedom.²

He then suggested that the television industry do its part by using "honesty and discretion in dealing with the critics, discouraging policies of bribery and intimidation, and carefully evaluating the criticism it receives."³

But the real burden of improving criticism rests on the critics. McGrady suggests the institution of a specialized journal devoted to discussions and analyses of profound critical problems.⁴ Such a journal, he feels, would provide a meeting ground and open forum for practicing critics, and an encouragement for new critics. But how such a journal would be initiated and maintained is a question Mr. McGrady does not consider. Such a journal would perhaps clarify some critical problems but the open forum sometimes raises more questions than it answers. Moreover, the audience, the object of the critic's labor, would benefit from such a journal only indirectly if at all.

²Pat McGrady, "The TV Study That Nobody Saw," Variety (June 8, 1960), p. 27.

³Ibid., p. 30.

⁴Ibid., p. 27.

Others have suggested a critic's circle for television critics, but Mr. McGrady argues, "The critics are without common objectives, similar tastes or mutual appreciation."⁵ If this is true then the journal would be of little more use than the critic's circle.

The kind of forum this writer would like to see would be one in which representatives of the television industry would meet with practicing television critics to discuss, under the guidance of a keen and disciplining moderator, what both sides expect from television. If the areas for discussion were limited and preplanned, taking up, for example, specific cases in drama for one discussion, and other areas of discussion in other talks, each one separate, some common denominator of thought might be reached. Television, when it comes of age sufficiently to present such discussions, would be the ideal place for such a series of discussions. By this means, critic and industry might come to understand one another, and the public would benefit by observing in operation the processes which they must learn from the informed critic if they are ever to evaluate television on their own.

But until such a forum becomes available each critic must himself devise the processes and methods by which he is

⁵Ibid.

to bring effective criticism before the public.

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY
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Abstract
THE QUALITY OF TELEVISION DRAMATIC CRITICISM

by Patricia Wilber .

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requirements for the degree of Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Nature and Purpose of the Study

This thesis is a critical evaluation of television dramatic criticism. Its purpose is to discover whether the methods of television critics enable them to produce criticism comparable in quality with the work of literary and dramatic critics, and further to suggest, where necessary, possible devices for improving the practice of television critics.

Scope and Method of the Thesis

The research covers four related areas, each in a separate chapter and each chapter stating its own conclusions. The first is a history of literary criticism offered as a background for evaluating modern critical methods. The main schools of criticism are explored beginning with Classicism and continuing through Neo-Classicism, Humanism, and Romanticism to the present with Scientific Method and textual criticism. This history traces major critical problems stressing not the problems but the methods and theories employed in solving them. The advantages of each school are analyzed but the chapter concludes that Scientific Method, employing description and evaluation of the work of art itself, and incorporating the application of all relevant knowledge, is the most efficient method.

The second chapter examines theatre criticism in order to supply an understanding of the special problems not only of criticizing drama but of writing such criticism in the daily papers. The chapter is constructed around recommendations from Shaw, Huneker, Mencken, Eric Bentley, George Jean Nathan, Stark Young and Walter Kerr, among others. Their methods are discussed in themselves and as they are

related to methods in literary criticism. It is concluded that an adequate theatre criticism must describe and evaluate at least two elements in the play: subject matter, and production, including directing, individual performances and significant technical problems. In this way, the criticism treats the work itself and considers relevant areas.

Chapter Three takes up the third area, television criticism. Through the writings of Frank Stanton, Clifton Fadiman, Gore Vidal, Eric Severeid, Gilbert Seldes, Hubbell Robinson and others, it is illustrated that the role of the television critic is often more complex than that of other critics because of the variety of television events and the heterogeneity of the television audience. It is concluded that the television critic becomes diffuse and ineffectual when he tries to satisfy all tastes and to cover all features. In attempting simultaneously to educate public taste and to increase the demand for better television, the critic often forgets his first duty, evaluation of the work of art, in this case the drama.

The conclusions of Chapter Three are borne out in Chapter Four which is a practical analysis and comparison of specific television reviews showing how adherence to method combined with proper application of relevant knowledge make the difference between informed criticism and mediocre reviewing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The thesis ends by advocating that each critic must adopt for himself a method which he will consistently follow. Whatever his method, it should employ specific terms, and apply all relevant knowledge to a description and evaluation of the play. Recommendations are made by which the newspaper industry and television's management can contribute to the improvement of criticism. Though a forum

is recommended in which critics and television representatives could discuss their problems clearly before the public, the thesis concludes that the chief burden of improving criticism rests on the critic himself.