



The Illumination Business: John Lahr starts a discussion on critics vs. reviewers

Mar 7, 2013

In [The Illumination Business: Why drama critics must look at and look after the theater](#) in the Winter 2013 Nieman Reports, New Yorker drama critic [John Lahr](#) differentiates between reviewers (consumer advice = bad) and critics (thoughtful reflection = good).

He writes: The reviewer and the critic have opposite objectives. Criticism treats the play as a metaphor; it interprets it and puts it in a larger historical, psychological and theatrical context. The critic is in the illumination business; the reviewer, by contrast, provides a consumer service. The reviewer treats the play as an event and reports its contents to the paying customers.

"Reviewing assumes that the plot is the play; criticism, on the other hand, knows that the plot is only part of a conversation that the playwright is having about a complex series of historical and psychological issues. The job of the critic is to join that conversation, to explore the play and link it to the world. The job of the reviewer is to link the play to the box office.

"The media has hijacked the word 'critic' to refer to almost anyone dispensing judgment. When people use the term 'critic' in reference to theater, they usually mean 'reviewer.' The critic sells thought; the reviewer sells opinion...."

And he continues. This article took on a viral life, which expanded when Charles McNulty, the reviewer (in Lahr's parlance, critic in his own) at the L.A. Times posted on his Facebook page, "Re John Lahr's broadside: I always thought he was part of the problem." The Facebook post is included in [George Hunka's](#) blog "[Superfluities](#)."

are interesting, including 512 likes (as of this writing) , praise from critic Robert Brustein and a call for conversation from playwright Deb Margolin. Comments on McNulty's Facebook page extend the conversation, mostly supporting his view. And comments on George Hunka's blog further the discussion and suggest that theater folks are eager to think about the current state of theater criticism.

Is this a theater issue only, or do other performing arts grapple with the sometimes conflicting goals of thoughtful criticism and enjoyable consumer advice?

<http://www.superflutiesredux.com/2013/03/03/john-lahr-v-charles-mcnulty-round-1/>