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AN ANALYSIS OF THE DRAMATIC CRITICISM OF FRANK RICH, 1980-1993

by

JAMES MASTERS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DRAMATIC CRITICISM OF FRANK RICH, 1980-1993

by

James Masters

Adviser: Professor Miriam D'Aponte

Frank Rich was chief drama critic for the *New York Times* from 1980-1993. His position, along with the circumstances of the times and the economics of theatre, gave him enormous influence over the theatre and audience's taste, both in New York and across the country. Because that influence will be felt for years to come, it is important to examine Rich's ideas on theatre and criticism. This dissertation explores Rich's interviews, articles and, above all, his reviews in an effort to determine what aesthetic theory, if any, governed his criticism.

Chapter One outlines the reasons such a study is significant and gives a history of how Rich came to the *Times*, including influences in his youth and early days as a writer that would affect his later criticism. Chapter Two examines Rich's views on the art of criticism, focusing on: his audience, the qualities he asks of a critic, and the substance of a Rich review. Chapter Three analyzes Rich's reviews to see what they tell us about his views on theatre. Here we see Rich's opinions emerge on such subjects as naturalism, the classics, unconventional works, polemic writing, and a writer's "voice."

Chapter Four looks at the power of the *New York Times* critic and at how Rich consolidated and increased that power through a style of reviewing that insisted that plays and theatre are relevant and important. Rich did this by: 1. relating plays to real life; 2. increasing the status of the theatrical arts by repeatedly extolling certain artists; 3. cultivating a voice of authority with his readers; and 4. targeting certain plays and their reviews to show that theatre and criticism are indeed important.

Chapter Five draws conclusions about what Rich felt constituted good theatre and effective criticism, what aesthetic theory lay behind his judgments, and how his legacy has affected criticism and theatre.

Acknowledgments

My appreciation goes to many people who were helpful, considerate, and encouraging while I was writing this dissertation. I am indebted to all those who have written on the subject of criticism in general and on Frank Rich in particular, and especially to articles on Rich by Mimi Kramer for *New York* magazine and Chip Brown for *Gentleman's Quarterly*. My thanks also goes to the members of my dissertation committee—Marion Holt, Marvin Carlson, and especially my chair Mimi D'Aponte, for their time, hard work, suggestions, and encouragement. I would also like to particularly thank Frank Rich who was accommodating and generous with his time and help. Thanks to Baby, Dano, David, and Paul, who put up with my being in the way for a long time, and to Jan Heissinger for everything she has done. My final thanks goes where it always goes for everything I am able to do—to my mother on earth and to my Father in heaven.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Frank Rich was chief drama critic for the *New York Times* from 1980-1993. During that time, he was—depending on the source—an untutored boy whose stock in trade was *ad hominem* criticism (David Mamet); a "critic-star," more important than any play he might be reviewing (*New York*'s Edwin Diamond); a destructive, supercilious stylist (the *Village Voice*'s Ross Wetzsteon); one of the best critics the *Times* has had (John Simon); an industry shill who knew little about serious theatre (the *Village Voice*'s Erika Munk); sensitive, sophisticated, exhaustively thorough, and catholic in his interests (Martin Gottfried); blind to innovation and susceptible to the lure of glossed-over sentimentality (Charles Marowitz); or, simply a regular guy trying to tell his readers what they might expect from a play (Rich himself).

The controversy surrounding Rich reflects the debate over the nature and function of criticism itself. What is the role of the critic? To serve as historian? As theatre advocate? As entertainer in his own right? As consumer guide?

There does seem to be at least one area where there is widespread agreement: that that criticism is best which is informed by a well-developed, consistent aesthetic theory. Such a theory might be expected to identify norms that govern evaluation of works of art, and attempt some conceptualization of the nature of art and of the aesthetic experience.[1] The purpose of this dissertation is to explore Frank Rich's views on criticism and theatre to see what aesthetic theory, if any, served as the basis of his criticism. The focus will be on

[1]This useful definition of a theory of criticism is from Mary McGann, "An Examination of Selected Drama Criticisms of Walter Kerr in the Light of His Theory of Aesthetics," Ed.D. diss., Columbia University, 1975.

how the theory is manifested in the reviews.

Rich has stated some of his beliefs about the nature of criticism. He has said that the critic's responsibility is to his readers, not to the theatre industry or to some abstract notion of "theatre." He has said that making judgments about a play's worth is the least interesting part of the critic's work. He has said that recreating the event for the reader was his prime function. He has said that those productions are best that give a "total sense of theatre."

These statements hint at an aesthetic theory. But, unlike such earlier critics as Walter Kerr and George Jean Nathan, Rich has not set down his ideas on criticism and theatre in writing. He has never articulated a well-defined theory that we can study and use to evaluate his reviews. In fact, he has dismissed the notion of one over-arching aesthetic theory and has said that he sees bits and pieces of wisdom in many theories. This dissertation explores Rich's interviews, articles, and, above all, his reviews to find those bits and pieces and see if perhaps they can be fashioned into a theory, after all.

In April 1980, Frank Rich left his job as film critic for *Time* magazine to move to the *New York Times* to serve as second-string theatre critic to Walter Kerr. In September, at the age of 31, he replaced the ailing Kerr as chief drama critic. His first review in that position was of an off Broadway play called *An Act of Kindness*. His last, on 24 November 1993, was *Perestroika*. In between, Rich reviewed more than 1,100 plays, including almost every show that opened on Broadway.

I have analyzed those reviews, along with Rich's other writings, to determine if there is a discernible aesthetic theory that lay behind his judgments. Among the questions considered: Can we extract the theatrical

standards that Rich applied? Did he judge by preset standards or evaluate a work by its own set of rules? Did he measure every play against an imaginary ideal? Did he most often focus on the script, acting, or directing? Did he rely more on impression or analysis? What were his biases or aesthetic predilections and did he acknowledge these? Did he see the theatre as a subject and, thus, criticism as a literature itself? Was his allegiance to criticism, to theatre, or to journalism? Was he writing with a specific audience in mind and, if so, who was that audience? Did he primarily judge on the basis of the artist's intention? Was his criticism personal or impersonal? Was he concerned with the development process of a theatre or an artist, or did he evaluate strictly on a show-by-show basis? Did he show an enthusiasm for theatre that caused people to want to see even shows that received negative reviews? Did he help develop and raise the standards and expectations of his readers? Did he perceive what was happening in the theatre of his time? And, did he change the destiny, or outlook, of the theatre?

In attempting to place Rich as a critic, two general studies on criticism have been especially helpful. Richard H. Palmer's *The Critics' Canon: Standards of Theatrical Reviewing in America* (1988) sets forth eight possible functions of the critic: to provide documentation, judgment, background and commentary, instruction to readers, entertainment, suggestions to artists, theatre advocacy, or a consumer guide.[2] John E. Booth's *The Critic, Power and the Performing Arts* (1991) categorizes critics as: critic militant, critic as historian, critic activist, critic educator, critic as gatekeeper to the arts; as well as the broader divisions of polemic critic—one who believes some kinds of theatre are essentially good and some essentially bad—and eclectic critic—one who finds

[2]Richard H. Palmer, *The Critics' Canon: Standards of Theatrical Reviewing in America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988).

value in all theatre and wants to show that everything can be done well or badly.[3]

Palmer also outlines certain characteristics of good and bad criticism; for example: use of concrete detail to support evaluative conclusions; the proportion of positive and negative commentary reflecting the overall degree of approval and disapproval; not harping on inconsequential details at the expense of the overall production. It has been useful, in evaluating Rich, to see where he fit in these categories and if his criticism adheres to these standards, not for the purposes of "grading" Rich—since he's under no compulsion to meet someone else's standards—but insofar as they are helpful guides for analysis.

Chapters two, three, and four are the core of the dissertation. Chapter Two: Frank Rich and Criticism examines Rich's comments on the art of criticism and looks at his reviews in light of those comments. The chapter is divided into three broad categories: Rich's audience, the qualities he asks of a critic, and the substance of a Rich review. Chapter Three: Frank Rich and Theatre analyzes Rich's reviews to see what they tell us about his views on theatre. The chapter is divided into script, acting, directing, and design, with these categories having subdivisions of their own. In this chapter, we see Rich's views emerge on such subjects as naturalism, "total" theatre, an author's "voice," the avant-garde, the classics, and polemic writing. Chapter Four looks at Rich's power and influence as it seeks to define his place in and contributions to American dramatic criticism.

I have not analyzed reviews—film, television, or theatre—that Rich wrote before he moved to the *Times*, though I may occasionally refer to his earlier writings if they shed light on his views. Although Rich still is writing for the

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[3]John E. Booth, *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

Times on its Op-Ed page, the end of his tenure as chief drama critic seems a legitimate cut-off point, both because it is his reviews with which I am primarily concerned, and because the power that the *Times* exerts over theatre seems to apply almost exclusively to the daily reviewer. (The loss of influence of Walter Kerr after his move to Sunday critic and Clive Barnes after his move to the *New York Post* give evidence of that.)

Conclusions have been drawn as to what Rich feels constitutes good theatre and effective criticism, what aesthetic theory, if any, lies behind his judgments, and how his tenure has effected criticism.

A distinction frequently is made between reviewing and criticism. Reviewing (sometimes called theatrical criticism) generally refers to a next-day critique of a specific performance designed to evaluate its effectiveness or to recreate the theatregoing experience for readers. Criticism (or dramatic criticism) is a more thoughtful analysis primarily intended for the theatre artist or for posterity. It often deals with text apart from performance, takes a more theoretical view, and is under no time constraints. Although that distinction occasionally surfaces in this dissertation, for the most part, the terms "reviewer" and "critic," and "reviews" and "criticism" are used interchangeably.

PREVIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

Several newspaper and magazine articles have briefly analyzed Rich's criticism, usually focusing on his style. No one has written a book or dissertation on the subject. There are dissertations and books on Rich's predecessors at the *Times* as well as on other critics in New York and elsewhere.

Mary McGann's "An Examination of Selected Drama Criticisms of Walter

Kerr" (1975) attempts to distill Kerr's aesthetic theory and then studies 20 selected reviews in light of that theory. McGann looks at the evolution of Kerr's theory and lists his contributions to the field of criticism.

Roderick Bladel's *Walter Kerr: An Analysis of His Criticism* (1976) examines Kerr's conception of art and his views on play writing technique and traditional forms of drama, and tries to show how these views relate to Kerr's reviews. Bladel's focus is on play writing but he also analyzes Kerr's criticism of acting, directing and design.[4]

In "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson" (1956), Jerry McNeely focuses on the differences between criticism and reviewing and looks at Atkinson as both critic and reviewer. In analyzing Atkinson's reviews, McNeely deals separately with plays by established playwrights, plays by new playwrights, plays with a "message," the acting element, and production elements.[5]

In *The Dramatic Criticism of Alexander Woollcott* (1980), Morris Burns determines that Woollcott had no defined body of theory that he followed in his reviewing, or at least none that he shared with his readers. Burns examines Woollcott's reviews of those actors and writers who elicited the most commentary in order to attempt to define Woollcott as a reviewer and show his views on acting, writing, and the theatre.[6]

In *The Dramatic Criticism of George Jean Nathan* (1943), Constance Frick explores Nathan's writings to determine his views on drama and criticism

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[4]Roderick Bladel, *Walter Kerr: An Analysis of His Criticism* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1976).

[5]Jerry Clark McNeely, "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1956.

[6]Morris U. Burns, *The Dramatic Criticism of Alexander Woollcott* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1980).

and to see how consistent he was in adhering to those views. Her study uses such categories as technique, dramatic action, and dialogue.[7]

Other dissertations on specific critics, most of which offer some variation on the idea of examining the critics' views on theatre in light of their reviews, are listed in the bibliography. Dissertations that deal with aspects of criticism other than the work of specific critics include: "A Methodology for a Content Analysis of Theatre Critics' Reviews" (1973) by Joseph J. Bellinghiere, and David James Anderson's "Theatre Criticism: A Minor Art with a Major Problem" (1989), which attempts to derive standards by which theatre criticism can be evaluated.[8]

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

Certainly Rich has contributed a large enough body of work to warrant a study. In his 13 years as chief drama critic, he wrote more than 1,100 reviews. There is precedent, too, with dozens of books and dissertations on other theatre critics. Rich's influence also validates a study of his work. While the critics studied in previous dissertations, especially Rich's predecessors at the *Times*, have had a great deal of power, perhaps none has had more power than Rich. He did not have the long tenure of Atkinson, nor—as yet—the noted career outside reviewing of Woollcott, or even Kerr. But circumstance and personality may have come together in Rich to give him more influence over the theatre of his time than any of those men had over theirs.

The *Times*'s chief critic has had a great deal of power for much of this century. As the number of daily newspapers in New York dwindled—from 14 in

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[7]Constance Frick, *The Dramatic Criticism of George Jean Nathan* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1943).

[8]Joseph J. Bellinghiere, "A Methodology for a Content Analysis of Theatre Critics' Reviews," Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1973; and David James Anderson, "Theatre Criticism: A Minor Art with a Major Problem," Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1989.

1920, to nine in the mid-1930s, to seven in the early 1960s, to three during Rich's tenure—that power grew. It is enhanced by the fact that the *Times* gives much coverage to the theatre and thus people interested in the theatre read the *Times*. Rising ticket prices also have contributed. In 1980, the average price for an orchestra seat at a Broadway show was about $30. By 1993, it was $65. Most theatregoers don't casually spend that amount; going to the theatre has become an event—and an infrequent one—and prospective audience members want to know ahead of time that they are not wasting their money. So they go see what the *Times* has decreed a good buy. As production costs have risen, many producers have shown less willingness to take chances; they are inclined to produce only those shows that seem likely to meet with the critics' approval. And, despite important work being done in regional theatre, New York still is where most shows get the stamp of approval before going out to the rest of the country, and where most playwrights and actors want to make their mark.

Though most often downplaying the power attributed to him, Rich has made contradictory statements. He has said that the power had nothing to do with him personally, that it goes with the territory of being the *Times* critic, that it was there before he came to the job and was there after he left, and that it is much overstated, anyway. He is quick to point out shows that had successful runs despite poor reviews from him (*42nd Street, Agnes of God, Brighton Beach Memoirs*) and plays that were not successful despite his approval (*Eastern Standard, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Hay Fever, Grownups, Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*). And, he says, many shows, particularly the giant musicals imported from England, are critic-proof. On the other hand, he admits that he felt best about his job when he, standing virtually alone among his

peers, was able to keep a *Sunday in the Park with George* running.

The shows that buck the *Times* review are exceptions. Far more numerous are the cases of a Rich pan on Thursday and a closing notice going up Monday (*Nick and Nora, Tricks of the Trade, Onward Victoria*). Rich's influence is seen not only in shows and careers that he may have curtailed, but also in those shows, writers, and causes that he championed, including William Finn, David Henry Hwang, Lanford Wilson, Marsha Norman, Jon Robin Baitz, John Guare, Eric Bogosian, Craig Lucas; revivals of musicals (*Guys and Dolls, Gypsy, The Most Happy Fella*); and plays that brought AIDS and homosexual characters and themes to the mainstream (*Angels in America, Falsettos, Eastern Standard, Jeffrey*).

Critics also charge that Rich and the *Times*—at the same time they were belittling the claims of excessive power—were in fact working to consolidate that power. They point to the fact that a show Rich liked often received several follow-up stories in the *Times*, while shows he panned were never mentioned again.

Economics and the circumstances of the times were not solely responsible for Rich's power: The way he wrote criticism contributed to his influence. This dissertation attempts to determine Rich's place in and contributions to American dramatic criticism. Rich was a different creature from many of the critics who had come before. For much of this century, the reviewer was a "gentleman critic" who saw his job as praising or finding fault in an eloquent, witty, and winsome manner. Rich was not the first to begin moving away from this style, but he did the most to replace it with the voice of authority. Rich's criticism differed from his predecessors' in several overlapping ways, all of which served to make theatre—and criticism—more relevant and more

important: 1. He related what was going on inside the theatre to what was going on in the world outside. 2. He became an authoritative voice, no longer simply one man with an opinion. 3. His reviews came to be as important in affecting what was happening in theatre as they were in defining it.

SOURCES

The primary sources used in the dissertation are Rich's reviews and other writings. Fortunately, the *Times*'s theatre reviews are compiled and published, every two years, in the series, the *New York Times Theater Reviews*.[9] This made it unnecessary to scour 13 years' worth of the *Times* on microfilm, searching for Rich's reviews. Reviews of Rich's predecessors at the *Times* and his contemporaries also were studied to see how their work differs from Rich's.

Other articles by and about Rich were studied to see what light they shed on his criticism. Of particular interest are "Exit the Critic," Rich's 9,000-word article reviewing his legacy as *Times* critic,[10] and Mimi Kramer's analysis of that article, "Finally Free of Frank," in which she casts Rich as a powermonger who used his reviews to dramatize himself and who changed the very nature of reviewing.[11]

Rich has given several interviews on the subject of criticism. The most extensive are an interview for a series called "Critics on Criticism" moderated by Jane Moss at the 92nd Street YMHA in January 1986,[12] and an interview with

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[9]*The New York Times Theater Reviews* 1979-80—1993-94 (New York: *Times* Books and Garland Publishing Inc.)

[10]Frank Rich, "Exit the Critic," *New York Times Magazine*, 13 February 1994, sec. 5, 32+.

[11]Mimi Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," *New York*, 14 March 1994, 47-50.

[12]Frank Rich, interview with Jane Moss, "Critics on Criticism" series at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York City, 6 January 1986.

Terrence McNally published in *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly* in Autumn 1987.[13] In both, Rich talks in a general way about the function of criticism, less about the nature of theatre, but in neither does he lay out a well-defined theory. I conducted my own interview of Rich, late in the research process to keep from being unduly influenced as I read his reviews.[14]

Useful books for this study include Booth's *The Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*; Palmer's *The Critics' Canon*; and Kalina Stefanova-Peteva's *Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?* (1993).[15] Particularly helpful dissertations and books on specific critics—helping to define methodologies and provide other insights—include Bladel's *Walter Kerr: An Analysis of His Criticism*, McGann's "An Examination of Selected Drama Criticisms of Walter Kerr," and Frick's *The Dramatic Criticism of George Jean Nathan.*

BACKGROUND

Frank Rich is a polite, friendly, articulate man in his mid-40s who doesn't look in the least as if he has butchered anything or anyone, lately or ever. He says he has changed little since those days—it is three years now—when he was the Butcher of Broadway, the Dark Prince of the Great White Way, the Emperor of Ashes. If we believe his critics, he must have been polite, friendly, and articulate . . . even as he was bankrupting producers and companies, unraveling dreams, unemploying thousands, and generally putting the kibosh on theatre as we know it.

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[13]Frank Rich, interview with Terrence McNally. Published as "In Conversation with Terrence McNally: Frank Rich," *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly* vol. 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 11-26.

[14]Frank Rich, interview with the author, New York City, 11 October 1995.

[15]Kalina Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?* (Langhorne, PA: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993). Stefanova-Peteva interviews more than fifty critics, artists, and producers on the critic's training, role in the theatre process, and influence.

In an insightful article for *GQ* magazine in 1990, Chip Brown put forth the idea that Frank Rich, the chief drama critic for the *New York Times*, can only be understood as an inevitable product of Frank Rich, the youngster who retreated into a world of make-believe after his parent's divorce. It was a world not of his own making but of other people's, and it was called the theatre. Rich's craving for attention and the approval of adults made him old before his time, an old man in a teenager's body, said Brown. He was left unable to tell counterfeit from real emotions and is a sucker for themes of parents and children, alienation and abandonment. As the child is father of the man, it was the youngster from a broken home finding solace in stage make believe who put his imprimatur on the theatre of an entire country for 13 years, and beyond.[16]

Brown's article raises interesting questions. For years, theatre artists, producers, and professionals submitted themselves, their work, their dreams—if not necessarily willingly—to the judgment of one man. In fact, this was a fairly anonymous man. In 1987, Terrence McNally interviewed Frank Rich for the Dramatists' Guild. McNally remarked that it had occurred to him while waiting for Rich to arrive that he had no idea what Rich looked like.[17] Seven years after taking over the most influential critic's post in the country, Rich's face, at least, still was relatively unknown.

Would it have come as a surprise to those whose careers and lives were so affected by Rich to know that he was writing drama reviews in junior high, was using complex sentences laced with concessive clauses at 15, spent his nights as a child recreating miniature stage sets in shoe boxes, was reading *Variety* at nine, knew the weekly grosses needed to keep each show in each

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[16]Chip Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," *Gentleman's Quarterly,* June 1990, 172-79, 235-36.

[17]*Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 21.

Broadway house running, and was captivated by the stories that his mother told about listening to the cast recording of *South Pacific* while she was pregnant with him?

Frank Rich was born June 2, 1949, to Helene Aaronson Rich, a public school teacher, and Frank Hart Rich, who, like his father before him, ran a small shoe store business in Washington, D.C. Rich grew up in Washington and the suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland. He attended three different elementary schools. His best friend and neighbor was Alan Brinkley, the son of NBC's David Brinkley, who had been born on the same day and in the same hospital as Rich. They played the kinds of games, did the kinds of things that most boys their age did. But Rich showed two early interests—unusual for a boy that age—first in journalism and then in theatre.

As Rich would say later, news is to Washington what theatre is to New York, and he felt practically born to journalism. He worked on his high school newspaper when that time came, but long before that the young journalist was creating his own newspaper, which he named *The Times*. He wrote it out longhand and he made carbon copies to give away in his neighborhood and at camp. Among other things, it included drama reviews.

In 1956, at age seven, Rich saw his first show, *The Pajama Game* at the National Theatre in Washington. It was a case of love at first sight, not only with that show, but with all of theatre. Rich went through periods of wanting to be an actor, a director, a playwright, and was especially enchanted by the set changes. For a couple of years, every set he saw he rebuilt at home in shoe boxes, complete with stick figures and turntables.

Helene and Frank Rich Sr. were divorced in 1956. When Helene

remarried in 1958, Frank and his sister, Polly, lived with her and their new stepfather, Joel Fisher, an aviation lawyer (who at one point would do some tax work for the League of New York Theaters). Rich has talked about how traumatic the divorce was and how he turned to the make-believe world of theatre as an escape. His parents, seeing his love of the theatre, encouraged him. Not only had Rich been used to seeing plays in Washington, but he and his parents also regularly took theatregoing trips to New York. He had seen his first Broadway show, *Bells are Ringing*, in 1956. After the divorce, his parents continued the trips separately, taking Rich to as many as a dozen plays during a week-long excursion to New York. When he reached his teens, Rich would save up enough money for a train ticket, travel alone to New York, and buy standing room tickets to as many shows as he could afford.

What time and money wasn't spent going to the theatre was spent reading about it. His stepfather showed Rich a copy of *Variety* one day, and Rich was fascinated by it. He read the magazine every week and learned the facts and figures for all the Broadway shows and Broadway houses—what was playing where, how long it ran, even the weekly "nut" that each show needed to make to stay open.

In 1959, at age 10, Rich read Moss Hart's autobiography, *Act One*, a gift from his mother. What Hart, who had his own troubled youth, wrote profoundly affected the ten-year-old Rich:

> [T]he first retreat a child makes to alleviate his unhappiness is to contrive a world of his own, and it is but a small step out of his private world into the fantasy world of the theatre. . . . Here on a brightly lit stage, before a hushed and admiring audience, are people doing the very things he has played out in his own fantasies. . . . Suddenly he perceives that his secret goal is attainable—to be himself and yet be somebody else, and in the very act of doing so, to be loved and admired. . . .[18]

[18]Moss Hart, *Act One* (New York: Random House, 1959), 6.

Rich would later say: "I identified strongly with [*Act One*]. I still feel it set out my life for me in some way. I was hooked."[19]

Rich worked on paper routes to make money to see shows. When that wasn't enough he ushered at Arena Stage and at the National. He hung around the National so much, the manager finally hired him as a ticket taker at $4 a show. The money was a fringe benefit; getting to watch all the performances he could for free was the main attraction. At that time, before the Kennedy Center was built, the National was the only pre-Broadway try-out house in town. New shows came in every two weeks and had two weeks to work themselves into shape before moving on to New York. Rich would watch everything that came through, good or bad, over and over again, five or six times. He was fascinated by the changes that would be made during rehearsals and the tryout process. He remembers the pre-Broadway tryouts of *The Odd Couple* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, remembers David Merrick and Gower Champion giving Carol Channing a new number at the end of Act I of *Hello Dolly*, remembers Barry Nelson going on in *Cactus Flower* with almost no rehearsal after Merrick fired the original star.[20] Rich later would say that being able to watch this tryout process was the single most formative experience of his early theatre life.

While other youngsters spent their summers at baseball camp or church camp or regular old camp camp, Rich spent his summers as a teenager at Indian Hills, a fine arts camp in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, that featured drama classes and productions. Rich flourished at the camp; he acted in some shows, worked backstage in some, and wrote reviews of others.

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[19]*Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 11.

[20]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 35.

In his *GQ* article on Rich, Chip Brown focused on Rich's camp experience as formative and called upon many of Rich's friends there to paint a picture of the young Rich. What emerged was a portrait of a boy old beyond his years, a kid out of place with most other kids, coming alive only when the subject was theatre and shining in the company of adults, a boy looking to put behind him a troubled youth and move quickly into a future of his own making. "He was a little old man in a teenager's body," remembered one boy.[21] Jacob Brackman, a Harvard undergraduate who was teaching creative writing at the camp, remembered Rich as being something of a social-climber, very controlled, very organized, very much a critic in the making. As Brown wrote of the precocious young Rich:

> Such transformations often grow out of the poignant show biz of dysfunctional families. A child learns to behave in a way that will captivate adults. Ultimately, of course, age undermines an identity that rests on the regard of others; the masquerade betrays a low store of self esteem. . . . Perhaps in his attraction to adults, his power to intrigue and need to please them, he was akin to Baby June in the musical Gypsy, singing "May we entertain you, may we see you smile. . . ." To say that precocity is a productive response to isolation and estrangement doesn't take away from the fact that it's still a kind of song and dance.[22]

It was Brackman who helped inspire Rich to go to Harvard, not because it had an outstanding theatre program or because Boston was a thriving theatre community. Rather, Rich was drawn to Harvard by *The Crimson*, the university's student-run newspaper.

Rich's early interest in journalism had never been usurped completely by his love of theatre; the two had merely joined hands. The other *Times*, not his longhand version but the one in New York, had always been linked to his love

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[21]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 177.

[22]*Ibid.*, 178.

of theatre. As he wrote in "Exit the Critic," his look back over his tenure:

> From earliest memory, it was Al Hirschfeld's drawings of plays and the imposing full-page advertisements heralding them in the Sunday *Times* drama section—and then the Brooks Atkinson reviews the morning after—that had transported my imagination to the New York theater while I impatiently languished 200 miles away.[23]

In addition to Atkinson, Rich also read Walter Kerr in the *New York Herald Tribune*, when he could find it. It was, in fact, Kerr, with his ability to recreate the sense of being in the theatre on a particular night, who most affected Rich and from whom Rich later would draw many of his own ideas about the writing of criticism.

Rich graduated magna cum laude from Harvard with a degree in American history and literature. He took an acting class as a freshman, auditioning for it with a speech from *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and doing his final project in a scene from *The Visit*, an experience that Rich called "excruciating" for both himself and the audience.[24] But that really didn't matter. He already had determined that he preferred writing about the theatre to writing plays or acting in them.

Harvard was not a great theatre school at the time. Rich remembers it as being almost anti-theatre, concerned mainly with literary courses about theatre. Boston was going through a time of undistinguished plays, as well.[25] *The Crimson*, though, was alive and well. Rich ran the editorial page after being named editorial chairman his junior year and wrote reviews—on deadline—of plays at Harvard and in Boston. His review of *Follies* during its pre-Broadway

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[23]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 35.

[24]*Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 12.

[25]*Ibid.*, 12-14.

tryout in Boston earned him a meeting with Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince. Sondheim felt that Rich had understood the show better than any of the "real" reviewers, and Prince subsequently quoted from it in his memoir, *Contradictions*. In fact, Sondheim and Prince were so impressed with the review and with Rich that they recommended him, then a junior in college, as the drama critic for the *New York Times*, a fact that Rich learned much later.[26]

Rich struck up a friendship with Daniel Ellsberg while at Harvard, participated in the antiwar demonstration in Washington in 1969, and wrote about politics for the editorial page. But college had not changed Rich. His views on politics and life had been shaped during his junior high and high school years growing up in Washington. He had attended Martin Luther King Jr.'s Freedom March with his mother and had been involved in protests against the war in Vietnam as a high school student. Even as Rich's troubled home life would play a role in defining his tenure as *Times* drama critic, so too would his affinity for liberal causes. As much as anything else, Rich would become a champion of plays on liberal social issues.

The "unfashionable" nature of theatre that had made Rich a fish out of water as a youngster, sent him on a detour away from his passion at Harvard. Advised by *The Crimson*'s film critic, Tim Hunter, that he would never get work reviewing a dead art like theatre, Rich turned to film reviewing and, with Hunter's help, set out to educate himself by seeing all the movies he could. He not only saw everything new, but also gorged himself on all the Wilder, Ford, Welles, Hawkes, Truffaut, and others he could see at Boston's revival houses.

About the time of his graduation, Rich met Gail Winston, a graduate of Wellesley who had grown up in Venezuela. When Rich went to Europe on a fellowship after college, Winston went, too. Although he traveled in France,

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[26] *Ibid.*, 13.

Israel, and the Far East, most of the time was spent in London, where Rich again surfeited himself on film and theatre, learning all he could about both his old and new passions. An article that Rich had written on Ellsberg for *Esquire* the summer after he graduated helped get him some free-lance assignments writing film features. (It also got Rich tailed through Europe by the F.B.I. since Ellsberg had just been named as the source for the release of the Pentagon Papers.)[27] Rich also tried his hand at writing a novel but it was never published.

When Rich returned to the United States, he was more film reviewer than theatre critic. He and four friends from *The Crimson*, along with several University of Virginia graduates, raised enough money to start their own paper, *The Richmond Mercury*, in Richmond, Virginia. It was a weekly, liberal, political muckraker in an ultra-conservative town. Rich was, among other things, the film critic. The paper lasted three years. His work there, along with the Ellsberg piece, helped him land his next job on *New Times* in 1973. *New Times*, now defunct, was a liberal news magazine focusing on politics. It was just getting off the ground in New York and needed someone to edit stories about politics, write movie reviews, and work for almost nothing. Rich fit all three bills. He started as an editor but soon became full-time film critic. As much as anything else though, the job was memorable because it finally put the young man—who had long yearned to be there—in New York. After two years at *New Times*, Rich took the job of film critic for the *New York Post*, working there at the same time that Martin Gottfried was drama critic. His stint coincided with the rise of such young directors as Altman, Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg, and Scorsese, with Pauline Kael holding forth over film criticism. Rich later would say that this was a glorious time for American filmmaking that hasn't been equaled since. Kael held a special place in Rich's estimation. In the late sixties, she had been a

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[27] *Ibid.*, 14.

leader in championing the idea that "high art" was not inimical with the commercial theatre or Hollywood. American popular culture could be the basis for important films and important plays, she said. The idea helped revolutionize cultural criticism and helped shape the views of a generation of new, young critics, including Rich. Theatre, even commercial theatre, could be more than simply good or bad; it could be important. And if theatre was important, so too was criticism.

In 1976, Rich and Gail Winston were married. They had a son, Nathaniel, born in 1980, and another son, Simon, born in 1984. In 1977, Rupert Murdoch took over the *Post* and began wholesale changes. Rich was bothered by what he perceived as the paper's new direction—"It became quite clear . . . the standards, never that high to begin with, were going to really go downhill."[28] He was one of several writers, including Anna Quinlin and Warren Hoag, who left the *Post.* Rich's move took him to *Time* magazine, where he would spend the next three years as film and television critic.

In April 1980, the *New York Times*'s Arthur Gelb convinced Rich to leave *Time* and become a cultural critic for the *Times.* Rich was to do some theatre and some film reviewing. Richard Eder had been chief drama critic for two years and had endured a stormy tenure. (Eder previously had been a foreign correspondent and came to the critic's post with little theatre reviewing experience.) He had left the job a year earlier and Walter Kerr—the Sunday *Times* critic—had assumed the daily job. But Kerr, who was eager to get back to the Sunday post anyway, became ill only two weeks after Rich arrived, and Rich, like it or not, was on the spot. He had a six-month try-out period and, on 9 September 1980, a brief story on page C8 announced that Frank Rich, age 31,

[28]Frank Rich, interview with Marc Pachter, "Politics and Art" forum at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., 1 May 1995. This interview was broadcast over the C-Span television network, 3 June 1995.

had been promoted to the position of chief drama critic of the *New York Times.* Thirteen years, 1,100 reviews, and thousands of invectives later, on Thursday, 30 September 1993, a four-inch blurb four pages deep inside the arts section announced Rich's reassignment as a columnist.

Rich continued as chief critic after the announcement through the fall theatre season and officially moved to the *Times* Op-Ed page in January 1994. He had seen the end coming two years earlier. His mother had died in August 1991 from injuries sustained in a car accident. As Rich wrote in "Exit the Critic," for the first time in his life, he found no escape in the theatre from the troubles of the world. His mother, who had sung him show tunes, who had given him *Act One*, who had taken him to his first play, was too bound up in his memories of the stage.

In 1992, Rich had taken a leave from his duties as theatre critic to write about the Democratic and Republican conventions, and, in January 1993, he began writing Public Stages, a column about non-theatre matters in the *New York Times Magazine.* As he said in "Exit," he had grown "more interested in writing about the world itself rather than just the theater's vision of that world."[29] On 24 November 1993, he wrote his last review as chief critic. It was a favorable look at *Perestroika*, the follow-up to part one of *Angels in America*, the work that had so affected Rich that he called it "the most thrilling new American play of my adult lifetime."[30] Rich said that *Perestroika*'s pivotal image, the festive farewell wave of a young man with AIDS, was akin to his own farewell. He, like the character, was offering a benediction and then moving on,

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[29]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 79.

[30]Frank Rich, "A New Generation on Old Broadway," *New York Times*, 6 June 1993, II:1:1.

determined to forge ahead, having seen death transfigured into something like hope.[31]

Time had not stood still, of course, during those 13 years, either for Rich or for the theatre. He and his wife, Gail, were divorced in 1989, and, in 1991, Rich married *Times* columnist Alex Witchel. The number of reviews dropped off over the years, from as many as 140 when he began to about 40 when he retired. He always saw more than he wrote about. He usually would begin a review the same night he saw the show, writing two or three hours then, and finishing and polishing the next day. A review might take anywhere from two to ten hours to complete.

Rich spent five years writing a book on scenic designer Boris Aronson, in conjunction with Aronson's wife, that is partly a biography and partly a look at how Aronson's designs were received. He had started another book about the history of New York theatre from 1945-1980, an effort to recreate the excitement of the period that so influenced the young Rich growing up. He put that project on hold after his mother's death and now is considering another book that would use some of the same material. It would be a smaller-scale look at the history of postwar American theatre. He also has tried his hand at a screenplay. It is, not so coincidentally, about a playwright from Yale torn between two women and also between being true to his craft or being a commercial

[31]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 79. The last paragraph of Rich's review of *Perestroika* reads: " 'Bye now!' cries a smiling [Stephen] Spinella as this great epic draws to a close, raising his long arm and throwing it back in an ecstatic wave. His indelible gesture feels less like a goodbye than a benediction, less like a final curtain than a kiss that blesses everyone in the theater with the promise of more life." Review of *Perestroika*, 24 November 1993, C11:5. (Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent reviews cited in this dissertation were written by Frank Rich and appeared in the *New York Times* and will be cited in this abbreviated form. Only the page number on which the review begins will be cited.)

success.[32] When a copy of the script was leaked and made the rounds of the New York theatre community, it was soundly panned.

That should have come as no surprise. Dubbed the Butcher of Broadway and the Emperor of Ashes later in his career, Rich was mistrusted, if not reviled, almost from the beginning. In July 1980, even before Rich became chief drama critic, the *Village Voice*'s Erika Munk had said that, in Rich, the *Times* was getting exactly what it wanted—a guy who really didn't know that much and who could be counted on as an industry shill, who would maintain the *Times*'s "passionate involvement" with Broadway that precluded any serious criticism from the paper's critics.[33] At times during his tenure, during the controversies with David Merrick, during the David Hare dispute, during the quarrels with Robert Brustein, Rich defended himself. Usually, he didn't. And defended himself against what? There, he may hardly have known which way to turn:

Frank Rich "kills harmless or amiable entertainments with disproportionate disapproval," said Martin Gottfried.[34] "Rich was a master of rhetoric, never bringing on the big guns unless something got his dander up," said Mimi Kramer.[35]

Plays don't remind him of life, said Charles Marowitz.[36] "Rich was eager to prove he was wise at the world desk," linking theater events to global issues,

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[32]Frank DiGiacomo and Joanna Molloy, "Frank-ly Speaking, It's a Mess," *New York Post*, 17 September 1991, 6.

[33]Erika Munk, "Times Out of Mind," *Village Voice*, 30 July 1980, 67.

[34]Martin Gottfried, "Frank Rich Defended," *Theater Week*, 26 February 1990, 25-27.

[35]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 50.

[36]See Gottfried, "Frank Rich Defended," 27.

said Todd London.[37]

Rich has "little enthusiasm for theater itself," said a panel of theatre professionals.[38] "Rich has the gift of enthusiasm," said Paul Berman.[39]

Rich doesn't know much, said Erika Munk.[40] Rich has a "first-rate intellect," said Jeremy Gerard.[41]

Rich doesn't gush, said Gottfried.[42] Rich gushes, said Jerry Adler.[43]

And on and on.

When Rich announced his retirement, there was dancing in some aisles. Mimi Kramer feels a "blast of relief" when she opens the paper now that Rich is gone.[44] David Merrick, Rich's longtime sparring partner, offered Rich's favorite parting shot: "Mr. Rich made many contributions to the American theater, none more great than to leave his post as theater critic."[45]

But Rich's leaving has received mixed reviews. Some people in the industry have lamented the loss of passion that seemed to exit with Rich, as well as the controversies that, at the very least, had people talking about theatre.

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[37]Todd London, "The First 100 Days: The New Order at the *Times*," *Village Voice*, 12 April 1994, 91.

[38]See Robert Massa, "All the Theater That's Fit to Print," *Village Voice*, 20 March 1990, 104.

[39]Paul Berman, "Is Theater Criticism Dead?" *Village Voice*, 24 June 1986, 28.

[40]Munk, "Times Out of Mind," 67.

[41]Jeremy Gerard, "Rich Ankles Aisle to Write 'Op-Ed' Style," *Variety*, 11 October 1993, 193.

[42]Gottfried, "Frank Rich Defended," 26.

[43]Jerry Adler, "The Seat of Power," *Newsweek* (22 September 1980): 89.

[44]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 50.

[45]Quoted in Rich, "Exit the Critic," 79.

David Richards, the longtime critic for the *Washington Star* and the *Post* and the *New York Times* Sunday critic for three years, succeeded Rich in the post of daily drama critic. But Richards stayed only eight months. Few seemed to dislike him and many people gave him credit for intelligent writing and for steering toward the mixed review and away from the pan-or-rave philosophy that Rich had been accused of using to enhance his power. But people complained of Richards's lack of zeal. "His writing lacks the passion to send people hurtling to the box office for tickets," said Francine Russo in a look back a year after Rich's retirement.[46] And people in the theatre had come to know what "a Rich show" was. They may have grumbled about Rich forcing his tastes on them during his tenure, but since his departure, they have been more at sea as to what kind of show might expect a good review from the *Times*.

Vincent Canby succeeded Richards and the long-time film critic seems to be leaving no mark whatsoever on theatre criticism. He provoked some snorts of derision with a few early snafus and misstatements, but he hasn't even elicited animosity the way Rich could and did. Considering Canby's age—he is in his 70s—the job of chief critic seems to be in flux, with a determination of who will settle in for the long term still undecided. In the meantime, as Todd London wrote in his look at the first 100 days of the new order after Rich's departure, Rich's name "has remained on everyone's lips."[47]

Although the extent of the power that Rich wielded is debated, no one denies that Rich had some influence on theatre, not only in New York but also across the entire country. The effects of that influence don't end with his retirement; they will probably be felt in some fashion from now on. It is

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[46]Francine Russo, "Guess What? Broadway Misses Frank Rich One Year after the Butcher Went Op-Ed," *New York Observer*, 5 December 1994, 1, 31.

[47]London, "The New Order at the *Times*," 91.

important, then, to consider Rich's views on criticism and theatre. Does Rich have an aesthetic theory that governed his criticism? Or is that too highbrow to expect from a reviewer on a daily newspaper? Rich says it is. At least, he declines to align himself with any theorist:

> I don't have one all-purpose aesthetic theory. I have lots of strong opinions about the theatre and I have strong aesthetic ideas on every aspect of theatre, from acting to set design to direction, but . . . in the theatre world of my time . . . I don't know what aesthetic theory works. . . . What makes theatre great and what keeps it alive in my view is that there are things happening in theatre that defy previous aesthetic theory all the time, theory right through Artaud and Peter Brook and the latest in aesthetic theory. There is theatre that breaks the rules all the time and is effective, and there are things that follow all the rules of what you were taught in school to believe, that are not effective. So I don't have any broad unifying aesthetic that could unite all my tastes, and I don't think I ever could. . . . I see bits of wisdom in all of them.[48]

We now turn to the task of finding those bits of wisdom.

[48]Rich, interview with the author.

CHAPTER TWO

FRANK RICH AND CRITICISM

The most striking feature of any interview of Frank Rich is how much it tells us about his ideas on criticism—what a critic is, what he does—and how little it tells us about his ideas on theatre—what it is, what it should do. We expect Rich to have well-developed ideas on the nature of criticism. But he was a critic of theatre and must have ideas there too—not a checklist, not indelible do's and don't's—but something at least akin to an aesthetic that governed his taste, his viewing, his writing. In other words, Rich has told us what he was doing but not what he was hoping to find. (The interview with the author is an exception; it was conducted with the primary purpose of eliciting Rich's ideas on theatre.)

Before turning to Rich's views on theatre in Chapter Three, we will look at his ideas on criticism and we will do so under three broad headings: his audience, the qualities of a reviewer, and the substance of a Rich review. Rich's comments on criticism will be discussed, and his reviews will be analyzed to see how they support, contradict, and add to what he has said.

HIS AUDIENCE

The idea of audience is central to the writing of criticism. The critic who has decided for whom he is writing will know best how to write. Just who that audience is is by no means universally agreed upon. Stanley Kauffmann says a critic must write, first, for the art, second, for the reader and, third, for the artist.[1] Clive Barnes says: "Obviously criticism is not meant for the artist. It's a private

[1]Stanley Kauffmann, interview with Jane Moss, "Critics on Criticism" series at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York City, 24 November 1986, tape 2.

conversation between the reader and the critic."[2] Gordon Rogoff believes that his audience is primarily artists but he realizes also that the artist isn't "much interested" in hearing from him.[3] Jonathan Kalb says that, ideally, criticism is a dialogue with artists;[4] Linda Winer says that her job is to have a conversation with the readers.[5] Brooks Atkinson believed that his first responsibility was to himself, his second was to his readers, and his third was to the art of theatre.

Frank Rich never waffled about his audience. It was not some abstract notion of "theatre," nor the industry, nor theatre artists. His audience, first and last, was the *New York Times* reader. Rich's view of his audience was intertwined with his view of the critic. Rich, harking back to his love of newspaper writing and his early years in the news-driven town of Washington, often described himself as a journalist who happened to be covering theatre and he insisted that the reportorial function of criticism could not be overlooked. While the critic is not *simply* telling "who, what, when, where, and why," he is *at least* doing that. Most journalists get their stories, dig up answers, through an intelligent and diligent use of their skills and resources—research material, sources, interviews, investigation; the critic gets his story, digs up his answers, through an equally intelligent use of his own peculiar resources—his knowledge, observations, and sensibilities, said Rich.[6] The critic brings those skills to bear to do what any other journalist does—tell a story in an informative, compelling manner. Criticism is "informed reportage on an inevitably

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[2]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?,* 57.

[3]*Ibid.*, 63.

[4]*Ibid.*, 60.

[5]*Ibid.*, 65.

[6]Gary Stern, "Drama Critic Frank Rich," *Horizon* (27 March 1984), 46.

ephemeral event."[7] Rich said: "In addition to understanding the rules of art, you have to be a reporter. Whatever your ultimate judgement will be, you have to be able to describe what happens on the stage as a witness for the people who didn't witness it."[8] The critic, then, like any reporter, is a surrogate for the reader, someone on the scene when the reader is not, with access to certain resources that the reader does not have; at the most basic, reporting the occurrence of an event that otherwise might have gone unnoticed or at least unexamined.

The view of the critic as reporter had obvious appeal. Rich once wrote that his idea of his job was to report what he saw on stage as he might in conversation with a friend—and it never occurred to him that someone might object to what he said.[9] If Rich were simply a reporter, no one should be upset with what he wrote—even though, as a reporter who was allowed to use special resources, he was sometimes critical of his subject.

Rich came in for much criticism because he never budged from his position that he was in no way writing for the artist or for the theatre in general. If some saw him as a shill for the industry, especially for Broadway—and he was accused of that—he never wavered in his belief that he was apart from that industry. In a 1984 article, he said: "I'm not part of the business of the theater";[10] in 1986: "I don't see myself as part of the theatrical community in any sense. I'm a journalist. I'm part of the journalistic community";[11] and when Rich was

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[7]Alex Witchel, "The David Hare-Frank Rich Correspondence," *7 Days* (29 November 1989): 28.

[8]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?,* 54.

[9]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 35.

[10]Stern, "Drama Critic Frank Rich," 46.

I'm a journalist. I'm part of the journalistic community";[11] and when Rich was ready to leave his critic's post for the *Times* Op-Ed page, it was because his "journalistic focus" had widened.[12]

The most public dispute over Rich's stance involved David Hare and his play, *The Secret Rapture.* After Rich criticized the 1989 Broadway production of *Secret Rapture*—having earlier written favorably of the play in London—Hare wrote Rich a three-page letter that circulated in theatre and press circles. Hare charged that Rich wrote irresponsibly and should be using his power to ensure the survival of the theatre and to support "the continuance of the serious play on Broadway."[13] Rich would have none of it, responding that his obligation was to his readers and his readers alone, not to theatre or the serious play.

Rich later would say, in a different context:

> The critic has to identify with the audience; he has to be the audience's eyes and ears. If the critic starts to identify with the theater to the extent that any "serious" play he sees should be given an encouraging review, even if he thought the play was boring or fatuous, or a play done by prominent theater people should receive an extra credit—if extraneous factors like that tamper with the opinion of the critic—the critic's judgement becomes worthless. Those extraneous considerations about the theater wreck the equation between the critic and the reader that has been built up through trust over a period of time.[14]

It was not an answer that did much for Rich's popularity, nor did it get him off the hook. Criticism exists only in relationship to the theatre community, his critics said, and to write in a way that is detrimental to that community hurts both criticism and theatre. For a critic to say his responsibility is to the reader alone

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[11]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[12]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 79.

[13]Witchel, "Hare-Rich Correspondence," 26.

[14]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?,* 62.

is disingenuous and counterproductive; a critic must also bear a responsibility toward the playwright because, in the long run, that *is* being responsible to the reader.

While other critics have embraced their role in promoting theatre, Rich's only nod to it was an implicit one—when he spoke of championing new writers or worthy but misunderstood works (such as *Dreamgirls*). Even here his reasoning was couched in terms of the reader; he wanted an audience to have a chance to hear this new voice, to see this exciting work.

Rich's refusal to acknowledge an obligation left the exasperated theatre community engaged in a one-sided debate, impotently throwing arguments up against a wall Rich had put up. Their cry grew more and more plaintive, more and more resigned over the years, for it was Rich, sitting on the critic's throne on the other side of that wall, unresponsive to their cries, who had the power.

If a critic determines that his job is to write for his publication's reader, he must also determine who that reader is. Rich admitted that reader was hard to define, in part because the *Times*'s readership is so large, so heterogeneous, and so wide-ranging. In part, Rich's reader was the theatregoer who had seen the play and wanted to compare his views to those of the reviewer, who used the review to engage in a conversation with the reviewer. Some were readers who would use the review to decide whether to see a production, but Rich insisted that most readers were not in that category. The majority of his readers, Rich said, were those "who never went to the theater no matter what the reviews," along with those who "wanted to go to the theatre but couldn't, for reasons of finances or geography."[15] This view emphasized Rich's reportorial

[15]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 36.

function—these people did not and would not witness the event, therefore Rich would be their witness. And it de-emphasized the critic's power and the consumer-aid function—the readers didn't go regardless of raves or pans.

Newspaper editors frequently are criticized for using theatre critics with no specialized theatre knowledge. Those editors counter with the argument that, since the critic is writing for the average person of no greater or less intelligence in any area, including theatre, than anyone else, that critic is perfect who knows no more or less about theatre than do his readers. The erudite critic, schooled in the history and theory of theatre, is rather less useful in representing the general population. Rich had a different view. He wrote for "the most intelligent reader imaginable, someone smarter than I am to whom I'm trying to convey what I want to say."[16] A playwright would not write for the lowest common denominator, Rich said, and neither must a critic. Not only is this not the target audience, but any audience also can tell when it is being patronized and written down to. Rich called his audience tough, demanding, opinionated, and suspicious of favorable reviews. "It's a very demanding audience, so I write accordingly. I expect cross-examination, and I try to anticipate it."[17]

Rich's readers were not to be trifled with and were not easily duped. In his response to Hare, he wrote that his "incredibly sophisticated" readers were too smart to be fooled, too smart to follow any critic like Pavlov's dogs, and too smart not to see when a critic was holding back:

> Your argument for rewriting is based on the unstated assumption that the readers of The *Times* should be addressed disingenuously, patronized, spoken down to. When critics do that—indeed, when any writers, playwrights included, do that—readers stop listening to them. Readers can smell when a writer is holding back and isn't telling them the whole

[16] *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 16.

[17] *Ibid.*

truth. . . .[18]

There are incongruities within Rich's imagined audience. His idea of the intelligent, sophisticated reader is at odds with his notion that a critic is a journalist who just happens to be covering theatre. Most journalists will concede that they are not writing for the most intelligent audience imaginable; many surveys, distressingly, say that newspaper writing is aimed at a reader with the equivalent of an eighth-grade education. Rich acknowledged that, if he was simply a journalist, he was at least one with a highly specialized audience, one that understood unexplained references to "Arthur Freed's heyday at M-G-M," a "Pigmeat Markham sketch," and an "Allan Bloom-style diatribe."[19] While Rich said in the Hare letter that his task was to spread the word about theatre to readers who were as passionate about theatre as he was, he has said at other times he was frustrated by the fact that many of his readers were not at all enthusiastic about theatre.[20]

Rich frequently appealed to the *Times*'s role in justifying his writing style. He said he was "inculcated . . . from the start" in his journalistic role: "to serve the paper's readers, not the theater's public relations needs."[21] Non-theatregoers excepted, he said:

> I was writing for the reader who did not want to waste a night or a hundred bucks on a dull evening—and who did not want a patronizing critic to trick him into doing so. I was hardly writing for the producer who might lose a million dollars on "Merlin." This was the way The *Times*

[18]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 175.

[19]The references are from Rich's reviews of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 3 November 1989, C3:1; *Uptown . . . It's Hot*, 29 January 1986, C13:1; and *Six Degrees of Separation*, 1 July 1990, II:1:1, respectively.

[20]*Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 17.

[21]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 37.

wanted it, too. . . .[22]

Rich spoke of how the weighty seriousness of the *Times*, with its standards of objectivity and fairness, always reinforced by its bevy of weighty, serious editors, sits weightily, seriously on any writer. In Rich's case, these standards, this objectivity, defined his role as serving the readers and not the theatre industry. The objectivity also translated into being true to himself:

> You have to go with your own judgment, your own opinion—but examine yourself to make sure you're being fair and also let the tone fit the circumstances. It's more of an attitude than a specific set of rules or a code, but it's instilled in everyone. . . . I write for myself in the sense that I try to be honest with myself and say, the best way I know how, whatever it is I have to say about a given play or production.[23]

The *Times*'s place as a national newspaper further complicated the task of defining Rich's readership. The *Times* considers itself in competition with such national newspapers as the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other national news magazines. Rich acknowledged that the *Times*'s prime responsibility is to readers in New York, but national news—even national theatre news—is important. *Times* critics do sometimes review productions in such pre-Broadway venues as New Haven, Chicago and Los Angeles, and Rich usually took an annual theatregoing trip to London during his tenure. Critics of the *Times* and of Rich argued that the paper's national and international theatre coverage was woefully inadequate. Rich's response was that the problem was basically one of money—it was simply too costly to have a reviewer cover many productions outside New York and its immediate surroundings.[24]

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[22] *Ibid.*, 53.

[23] *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 15-16.

[24] *Ibid.*,19.

For Rich to have defined his audience was not enough. He had also to decide what he was trying to communicate to them. On the surface, Rich gets prosaic marks. Although he did not admit that his function was simply to turn thumbs up or thumbs down on a production—he said recreating the event, not judging the work was his prime objective—he never offered a persuasive argument that he was more than a consumer guide. He asserted that he was not performing certain potential functions of the critic—to aid the artists, to promote theatre—and he waffled on others. In his book, *The Critics' Canon*, Richard Palmer lists eight possible functions of a review: to serve as consumer aid, to serve as production aid, to offer documentation, judgment, commentary, instruction, entertainment, or advocacy.[25] If these are arranged on a scale from what might be called least lofty to most lofty, we might have: consumer aid, judgment, entertainment, commentary, documentation, production aid, instruction and advocacy. Several factors combined to push Rich toward the least lofty end of that scale, including his tendency to write hit-or-miss reviews, his harshness with what he considered unworthy and his seeming relish of that harshness, his insistence that he was a journalist and not part of the theatre community, that he was serving his reader and not the industry or posterity, and the economics of theatre, which left readers more dependent on someone to tell them what to see. The issue is more complicated than that but for now we must leave Rich looking like little more than a consumer guide.

QUALITIES

To Frank Rich, the indispensable qualities for a critic are the ability to write well and a great passion for theatre. Few would argue that Rich could write; many would question his passion. Rich also would say that, to be

[25]Palmer, *The Critics' Canon*,15-17.

effective, a critic must have a reservoir of knowledge from which to draw. "First, you have to be able to write, in order to communicate what it is you want to say. If you know everything about your art form and can't write, you cannot be a critic," Rich said.[26]

Rich was, and is, a good writer. He is concise, thorough, graceful, knowledgeable and well-organized. His reviews were full; he never seemed to have left out anything he wanted to say, to be shortchanged by time or space. When making a complex observation, he took the time and space needed to explain it thoroughly, lucidly. He was not boring, stodgy, or uninteresting, and managed not to seem repetitive in what is a repetitive form. His best reviews read like essays, though he was not always successful in getting across the great thoughts and emotions he was after. He often wrote long, complex sentences laden with clauses, but he was not likely to lose the reader in the middle of those. It was a style that might have lent itself to the use of the occasional short, pithy sentence for effect, but Rich rarely did that.

Compare Brooks Atkinson's review of a revival of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to Rich's look at a later revival:

> But *Six Characters in Search of an Author* goes beyond theatrical satire. It looks over the rim of doom. Pirandello's skepticism is cosmic and frightening. This is a macabre fantasy. It illustrates a chaotic thought. It carries the full weight of Pirandello's pitiless convictions.[27]

There is Atkinson at six sentences, 44 words. And Rich:

> "Six Characters" does not merely demand a re-examination of the relationship between theater and life—or between those dreary academic poles of illusion and truth—but it also asks, far more profoundly, that each member of the audience examine his own singular

[26]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[27]Brooks Atkinson, Review of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *New York Times*, 12 December 1955, 38:1.

relationship to existence.[28]

One sentence, 45 words.

As good a writer as he is, Rich's self-importance and authoritative tone kept him from being an especially appealing one as a critic. If he was not distant and academic, neither was he warm and inviting. He professed a great allegiance to his readers, but he did not come across, even after years, as a good friend, confiding in the reader. He seemed to be standing back, both watching himself write and watching for the effect he might have. He was not a regular Joe, he was not swapping stories with anyone. Alexander Woollcott might just have dashed off his review as he flew out the door for a rendezvous with someone wildly witty, wildly famous. Walter Kerr might have sounded as if he wrote his reviews ensconced at home in a warm, cozy room where a fire was going and all was right with the world. Frank Rich, the man behind the review, was never so clearly defined, rightly or wrongly, in the imagination. If anything, his review was handed down from the throne room, and it had more to do with him than with the reader. He dictated, assumed you were caught up in what he was caught up in and, on occasion, though not always, wrote well enough to make it so. He was not light-hearted, even with minor entertainments, even when he liked them and he could be dismissive even in praise. He could write with great humanity when he wanted to, often about homosexual characters and alienation.

His sentences were smartly evocative. Broadway continues to "dwindle into a fairway for musicals" he wrote in one end-of-season wrap-up.[29] In *Six*

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[28]Review of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 24 July 1989, C13:1.

[29]Frank Rich, "At Its Best, the Theater Illuminated Our World," *New York Times*, 1 June 1986, II:1:3.

Degrees of Separation, Stockard Channing gives a "performance that can bring a laughing audience to a tear-stained hush as smoothly as if she were turning down the volume of a radio."[30] *Cymbeline* is not simply a bad production, but a "reckless entry in the Shakespeare Festival's Marathon."[31] Robert Prosky melts into a "pudding of lifeless flesh" in *Glengarry Glen Ross.*[32] David Hare's *Murmuring Judges* is less drama than "journalistic research shoehorned into . . . melodrama."[33] Ian McKellen's Platonov in *Wild Honey* is a "shabby rural Don Juan" who "pumps up his chalky voice and flushes his face to pledge undying devotion to women he transparently doesn't love. . . ."[34] And, "Almost anything can happen," wrote Rich, "as history cracks open in 'Angels in America.' "[35]

"It is Mr. Kushner's sly point that gay people could learn something from the despicable Cohn about the amassing of political power, and it is one of the play's most provocative strokes that this cutthroat often has the funniest and smartest lines."[36] To talk about the author's "sly point" and reach back to Roy Cohn as "this cutthroat" was telling writing; it showed a writer in top form conjuring the right image, making the right point, augmenting the play through his description.

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[30]Frank Rich, "A Guidebook to the Soul of a City in Confusion," *New York Times*, 1 July 1990, II:1:1.

[31]Review of *Cymbeline*, 1 June 1989, C15:1.

[32]Frank Rich, "The Best May Be a Harbinger of Brighter Days," *New York Times*, 30 December 1984, II:3:1.

[33]Frank Rich, "The Reagonite Ethos, with Roy Cohn As a Dark Metaphor," *New York Times*, 5 March 1992, C15:5.

[34]Review of *Wild Honey*, 19 December 1986, C3:1.

[35]Review of *Angels in America*, 10 November 1992, C15:3.

[36]*Ibid.*

Rich was a master at the use of clauses, often using them to give and take in the same sentence. His unfavorable review of *The Will Rogers Follies* is full of these:

> It is a tribute to Mr. Carradine—his air of unpretentious conviction, humility, warmth and good humor—that he keeps "The Will Rogers Follies" from riding off the rails into ridiculousness in its pompous waning scenes. He doesn't really resemble Rogers, and he's at best a passable lariat twirler, but he surely captures the man's engaging spirit even when the show is making every effort to embalm it. . . .[37]

Rich's detractors praised his writing skill almost as often as did his fans, though to different purpose, couching complaints about his vindictive tone and abuse of power in left-handed compliments on his writing skill. Rich would not be so destructive, they said, if he were not such a good writer; his supercilious tone, his telling, sometimes fatal blows, would always be more sharply felt because of his way with words. Robert Brustein, complaining of Rich's excess of power in "An Embarrassment of Riches," saw another negative side to Rich's skill: "Indeed, [Rich's] literary competence has been responsible for exacerbating the [power] problem, since it has helped to enhance his position both with his editors and his readers."[38]

Rich had his flaws as a writer. He used too many adjectives when simply stating the thing itself would better serve. He tossed in too much trivia, overused comparisons and contrasts, showed little humor and little humility. His references to past productions, with which he laced his reviews, could border on dissembling, almost giving the impression he had seen shows before his time. While he did not fall victim to the critic's bane—coming to believe that his sense of humor is the subject of the review—he could give off the idea that the

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[37]Review of *The Will Rogers Follies*, 2 May 1991, C17:1.

[38]Robert Brustein, "An Embarrassment of Riches," *The New Republic* vol. 206 (16 March 1992): 28.

play was no match for the review, what they were doing was not even a good excuse for what he was doing. He occasionally stretched too far for his metaphors: He had made his point about the daring of Tennessee Williams and Vanessa Redgrave (in *Orpheus Descending*) and could have stopped short of comparing them to "great beautiful deer bounding across a highway after dark."[39]

Rich didn't go out of his way to engage in a witticism as often as earlier critics did, and when he did, he was never as winning as, say, Kerr. ("I did bring two things away from the theater with me, not counting my raincoat."[40]) Rich's reference to an Andrew Lloyd Webber piece as being "translated from the original Hallmark"[41] and of Tom Hulce succeeding in *A Few Good Men* "despite the handicap of a Hollywood coiffure,"[42] were neat, but did not blend seamlessly into a story that was itself witty throughout. When he reached for wit through the use of phrases that mirrored the subject matter of the play he was reviewing, he could fall flat or come off looking a bit silly: An evening watching a sloppy production of *Fanshen*, a play about the Chinese revolution, is a "tedious Long March."[43] When he was panning a play, he was more likely to rely on the less-effective wisecrack than the witty remark.

Rich's most consistent stylistic quirk was his tendency to wrap up each review in the final paragraph in an almost epigrammatic manner, often referring

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[39]Review of *Orpheus Descending*, 25 September 1989, C15:4.

[40]Walter Kerr, Review of *Finn Mackool, or the Grand Distraction*, *New York Times*, 12 October 1975, II:5:1.

[41]Review of *Aspects of Love*, 9 April 1990, C11:1.

[42]Review of *A Few Good Men*, 16 November 1989, C23:4.

[43]Review of *Fanshen*, 3 February 1983, C20:1.

back to a phrase or thought mentioned earlier in the review. Even when these worked and avoided seeming strained, they were not the equal of the rest of his writing; style for style's sake rather than integral content. And sometimes, they didn't work at all. We almost got a wink and a nudge when he ended a review of the play *Square One* by saying that its star, Dianne Weist, "is much too talented an actress and at far too high a point in her career to go back to square one."[44] He liked neither Kate Mulgrew's performance as Tamora in the Public Theater's *Titus Andronicus*, nor the production itself, which featured a barbecue in its set, and did himself no favors with this ending: "Put this Tamora in close proximity to the fateful barbecue, and the atmosphere of 'Titus Andronicus' switches instantly from fourth-century Rome to present-day Tony Roma's."[45] An unfavorable review of a heavy-handed production of *The 10th Man* referred to Jewish aspects of the play and ended by saying that Joseph Wiseman "presides over an exorcism that only dietary laws forbid one from labeling pure ham."[46] Better was: " 'Only the floor kept her legs from going on forever.' With lines like that, I, for one, would have been happy if 'City of Angels' had gone on just as long."[47] Tommy Tune's *Grand Hotel* won praise for its visual impact but was criticized for the vacuous storyline. "Mr. Tune," ended Rich, "has built the grandest hotel imaginable in 'Grand Hotel.' It would be a happier occasion if so many of its rooms weren't vacant."[48]

If he did not refer back to an earlier point or make a stab at wit, he still

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[44]Review of *Square One*, 23 February 1990, C3:1.

[45]Review of *Titus Andronicus*, 21 August 1989, C13:1.

[46]Review of *The Tenth Man*, 11 December 1989, C13:1.

[47]Review of *City of Angels*, 12 December 1989, C19:4.

[48]Review of *Grand Hotel*, 13 November 1989, C13:3.

ended in epigrammatic fashion, closing with a poignant, all encompassing summation, usually linking the play to the world outside the theatre. Such summations worked better; how well usually depended on how successful the rest of the review had been in making those links: " 'Amadeus' may be a play inspired by music and death, but it fills the theater with that mocking, heavenly silence that is the overwhelming terror of life."[49] A character in *Six Degrees of Separation* has cried bitterly "I didn't come here to be this," and Rich ended with "This play invades an audiences' soul by forcing it to confront the same urgent question asked of its New Yorkers: If we didn't come here to be this, then who do we intend to be?"[50]

PASSION

Did Frank Rich have that second quality that he set down as indispensable for a critic: a passion for theatre? Rich always insisted that he did. "I think the most important thing you must have is a real passion—love, if you will—for what it is you're reviewing. If not, you would go insane," he told a group at a "Critics on Criticism" series. "People who don't have that passion constantly ask me, 'How can you see so many lousy plays?' If you have a love for it, that's not an issue."[51] Almost every interview sported a similar sentiment and the idea of passion for theatre ran throughout his "Exit the Critic" story. Rich's background certainly seems to verify the picture of a guy who could not stay away from the lure of the theatre: the trips to New York even as a child; recreating sets he had seen inside shoe boxes; turning into such a Stage Door

[49]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

[50]Rich, "Guidebook to the Soul of a City," II:1:1.

[51]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

Johnny at the National that he got a job taking tickets; learning the seating capacities for theatres and the break-even points for productions. In "Exit," Rich quoted Joseph Papp as saying, in one of their last conversations, "I want you to know that even when I was angry at you I always knew you loved the theater."[52]

It is one of the many lines in the retrospective that drew snorts of derision from Rich's detractors, many of whom had long lamented Rich's lack of passion. A panel of theatre professionals sponsored by the American Theater Critics Association once accused Rich of an "undue nastiness toward individual shows and . . . little enthusiasm for theater itself."[53]

When asked in an interview if he hoped that the public would not go see a production about which he had written unfavorably, Rich responded, defensively, that that certainly is not the case. "I was a theatregoer before I was a critic. If you like the theatre you like to see everything," he said.[54] He has often said that one quality he admires in a reviewer—Kerr is his prime example—is that, even in a negative review, he can get a reader excited about a play. "To me the test of the good critic is his ability to make someone go and see something that he didn't like," Rich said.[55] And the way to do that?

> If a critic puts all his cards on the table and describes what he saw, and doesn't just give an opinion, but explains by what experiences and analyses he's reached that opinion, a reader can say: I see why this critic didn't like it, but the event is so clear to me that I know my taste is different from his, and half of the reason he didn't like it is a reason I would like to see it.[56]

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[52]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 66.

[53]Massa, "All the Theater," 104.

[54]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[55]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 54.

[56]*Ibid.*

While Rich did analyze, describe and explain, still it is difficult to find any of his negative reviews that would get a reader excited about the play. His style of reviewing supplanted that of the gentleman critic, who recognizes that he is only one person with one opinion and a fallible one at that, with the authoritative voice. Any reader would have had second thoughts about venturing out to see what had been decreed worthless by the voice of authority. Rich's tendency to condemn a play with one lethal sentence early on and then eviscerate it in each succeeding paragraph left the show little chance with the reader, and his tone makes it difficult to believe that he would have been glad if people had flocked to see something he thought was unworthy.

Rich's defense—any critic's defense—is that, far from showing a lack of passion for theatre, tough, demanding reviews that weed out the dross and promote the excellent are indicative of that very thing—a love of theatre and a desire for its best.

Even the detractors who insisted that Rich had little love for theatre in general would not argue about his passion for certain shows, nor for his dedication and skill in championing them. *Sunday in the Park with George, Falsettos, Dreamgirls, Six Degrees of Separation, Grown Ups, Angels in America* all held an extraordinary pull on Rich and, if they would not let him go, he would not let them go either. If one review was not enough, he would write follow-ups until he felt he has made his case. He often would mention his pet shows in reviews of other plays, if nothing else, keeping their memories alive.

It is a bit odd to find that, now that he has left the critic's post for the Op-Ed page, Rich is missed most for the very thing many said he didn't have: passion. In looking back on the first 100 days after Rich left his post, Todd London complained of the "lack of ardor" of Rich's successor, David Richards. London

claimed that Rich proved early critics wrong who questioned his devotion to the theatre, and he spoke of the loss of Rich's "emotionalism," which, at its best, "could make statues weep."[57] In reviewing Rich's legacy for *Theater Week*, Michael Goldstein said that Rich conveyed an urgency and excitement the way other critics did not.[58] Even Paul Berman, in an article highly critical of Rich and criticism in general, gave Rich credit for "the gift of enthusiasm." Berman said, "He can make you feel the whole theater has risen cheering to its feet."[59] In her look at *Times* criticism after Rich, Francine Russo said that the producers who had been Rich's harshest critics now lament his loss. "No one dislikes David Richards," wrote Russo, "but when he likes a play his writing lacks the passion to send people hurtling to the box office for tickets." Russo quoted producer Mitchell Maxwell as saying, "I don't think David Richards has written a single review that affected anyone."[60] Like him or not, that is not the case with Frank Rich.

A RESERVOIR OF KNOWLEDGE

In addition to writing well and having a passion for theatre, Rich insisted that a good critic must have a wide-ranging education. He must know the history of theatre, the history of art, history in general, the world of today, and, if that weren't enough, he must know much about life:

> There's too much reviewing in this country in all the arts that is so completely oriented toward show business that you have no sense of artistic tradition or of the world around you. You cannot review a play about history if you do not know history. You cannot talk about something

[57]London, "New Order at the *Times*," 91.

[58]Michael Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," *Theater Week*, 10 January 1994, 15.

[59]Berman, "Is Theater Criticism Dead," 28.

[60]Russo, "Broadway Misses Frank Rich," 1, 31.

> that happened in the theatre if you do not know the history of art beyond the theatre. There's much too much reviewing . . . in which everything is just seen in terms of the one art form. . . . [Y]ou cannot review a musical like "Evita" and just say it's better than this Hal Prince musical, or worse than this one, or better than this Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. It's also about Eva Peron. And you should know something about that history, not just whether the staging was Brechtian or not.[61]

Rich knows theatre history, though he used that knowledge unevenly. He has a prodigious knowledge of Broadway's—especially the musical's—history, and commented on shows from that period with authority. He could come across as academic in his reviews of the classics, weaving in what-every-scholar-should-know-about-Shakespeare, Moliére, or whomever, invariably following the company line, staying within the parameters of the traditional outlook, never venturing the occasional alternative opinion. He recognized elements of Kabuki, Kathakali dance dramas, Dadaist improvisation, and Cubist dramatic structure, and might comment on D'Oyly Carte companies, the living tableau that Joseph Urban created for Ziegfeld, John Ford's "open-throated blank verse," or the effect that putting *Iphigenia in Aulis* as prelude to *The Oresteia* had on the character of Clytemnestra.

Rich also knows much about arts outside the theatre. He wrote with authority on plays that dealt with the subjects of dance, opera and painting, and brought in frequent allusions to those arts in reviews of other plays. George Seurat's "La Grande Jatte" is "a manifesto by an artist in revolt against Impressionism. Atomizing color into thousands of dots, Seurat applied scientific visual principles to art" he said in his review of *Sunday in the Park with George* and then proceeded to make the case that Sondheim and Seurat are doing the

[61]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

same thing in manipulating characters into theatrical composition.[62] *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun* gets the "part Etruscan, part Magritte" design it needs.[63] *Skirmishes* has a character "looking as gnarled by grief as a figure in an Alfred Leslie painting."[64] The music for *Marvin's Room* recalls "Claude Bollingesque jazz,"[65] and the set of *In the Jungle of Cities* is "reminiscent of a spooky George Tooker painting" while the costumes draw on "George Grosz caricatures."[66] He related Dawn Powell's novel *The Locusts Have No King* to *Six Degrees* and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* to *Angels in America.* He sprinkled in references to Twain, Fitzgerald, Proust, Milan Kundera, Tom Wolfe, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Willa Cather, Larry McMurtry.

Rich seemed customarily to know exactly what he needed to know in order to write any review. If there was a play about Ty Cobb, he had read the definitive biography; if Sid Caesar put together a revue in 1989, he had seen the one Caesar performed in 1962; if a play debated the Bhagavad-Gita in a superficial manner, he pointed it out; if the characters in a play discussed D.M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, he had read the book, too; if there was a revival of a Somerset Maugham play, he knew where Maugham's literary reputation stood in its waxings and wanings; if there was a play about Truman Capote, he knew what questions about Capote it didn't explore; if an author wrote in a way that emulated his character's favorite Russian writers, Rich recognized the fact; if there was a new version of an Arthur Schnitzler play, he knew that Schnitzler

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[62]Review of *Sunday in the Park With George*, 3 May 1984, C21:1.

[63]Review of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, 19 March 1992, C15:3.

[64]Review of *Skirmishes*, 3 January 1983, C17:4.

[65]Review of *Marvin's Room*, 6 December 1991, C1:5.

[66]Review of *In the Jungle of Cities*, 6 November 1991, C19:2.

pioneered "examining the internal coordinates of behavior," that the work called for "choreography in the dark style of Balanchine's La Valse," and that the play "has hardly been seen in New York since the beginning of the century."[67]

Rich didn't always use his knowledge wisely. He loves show business trivia, minutiae, comparisons and contrasts so much he sometimes shoveled them into reviews to an embarrassing extent. If a reference to Edward Hopper or Chekhov conjured up just the right image for the reader, allusions to more obscure artists unfamiliar to many readers—a "quasi-Adlerian . . . meditation"—conjured up nothing at all.[68] In a review of Steve Tesich's *The Speed of Darkness*, Rich managed to get in references to *Breaking Away, Division Street, Square One, A View from the Bridge, All My Sons, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Buried Child, Sticks and Bones, The World According to Garp, Four Friends, A Few Good Men, The Hard Way, Sweeny Todd, and* the *Twilight Zone.*[69]

His background as a film critic led him to make frequent allusions to movies. (This was in addition to linking actors to movies they had been in.) Here, too, some of the illustrations were more trenchant than others. References to *Citizen Kane, Dr. Strangelove, 2001*, would hardly elude anyone, but comparing some aspect of a play to *The Conformist, Putney Swope, Trash*, the actress Blanche Yurka, or a Bernard Herrmann film score raised more questions than it answered.

Rich's allusions to theatre history, to the arts, to Chekhov or Expressionism or Bertolucci or the W.P.A. could be pertinent; when used wisely

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[67]Review of *The Loves of Anatol*, 7 March 1985, C19:5.

[68]Review of *The Archaeology of Sleep*, 19 January 1984, C14:3.

[69]Review of *The Speed of Darkness*, 1 March 1991, C1:1.

they could add information and flavor to the review and to the reader's feel for the production. His knowledge of and enthusiastic affection for Broadway's past undoubtedly served both him and the reader, as well as that kind of theatre. But his knowledge of the classics and unconventional works—a drier, academic kind—did less to increase his appreciation of those types of drama or add to the perceptiveness of his review. In fact, whether this piling on of information provided any real insight, whether it indicates that Rich *had* any real, valuable insight or whether he simply had a store of information to draw on and had a way with words as well, has been questioned. Charles Marowitz called it a kind of "cross referencing" rather than a rich, "artistic frame of reference."[70] Stanley Kauffmann, though not singling out Rich, said that today's critics have more education than yesterday's in many areas, including theatre, but that doesn't mean that the critic has anything profound to say. Kauffmann said:

> It's quite deceptive now. In a sense it's more insidious because when you read a review by Mr. Smith in 1935, you knew he was a fool, now when you read a review by Mr. Smith 2nd, it seems intelligent: He's using a lot of long words in reference to Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Bahktin, but he doesn't perceive any more than his predecessors did.[71]

Rich's best reviews did show him making connections with the needs and longings of playwrights, characters, and audiences alike. The deluge of information was sometimes helpful, sometimes not. In any event, this informative style of Rich's whereby he told what writers, directors, and other artists had done before and how their work related to society, history, and the arts, was at the heart of Rich's criticism, as we will see in detail in Chapter Four.

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[70]Charles Marowitz, "1980-1990: Rich Years or Lean Years?" *Theater Week*, 19 February 1990, 16.

[71]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 73.

PRACTICAL THEATRE EXPERIENCE

Although Rich insisted on the importance of a broad education and a reservoir of knowledge of theatre, art, and history, he did not believe that a critic need have worked in the theatre. Rich's practical experience largely was limited to working on plays at camp as a teenager, and to an acting class at Harvard. He did not believe this was a disadvantage; the indispensable factors, he said, are a lifetime of seeing and reading plays: "I feel you cannot create a drama critic out of someone who hasn't been going to the theatre his whole life. It's impossible. If you don't have the habit, there's no substitute."[72] Rich did not seem defensive about his lack of practical experience. He realized early on, he said, that he preferred writing about theatre to working in it, and was not a frustrated artist taking out those frustrations on successful artists. He answered questions about the lack of experience by casting back to his early play-watching days. Seeing plays over and over at the National Theater, watching directors, actors, and choreographers make changes during the shows' runs as they readied them for the move to Broadway was an incredibly formative experience; that, he maintained, was practical experience for a critic.

Most theatre practitioners would disagree. Although Rich's intelligence and his knowledge of theatre facts were rarely questioned, people in the industry complained that he, and most critics, are ignorant of procedure. They don't understand the dollars and cents and labor that go into producing a show and, if they did, they would not be so quick, so cavalier about "destroying months, even years, of work." Practitioners also questioned the ability of Rich and other critics to assign blame, or even praise, in a production. Most people in the industry say it is almost impossible for them to say which member of the creative team is responsible for an idea, a bit of business, a specific moment,

[72]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

and it grates to hear a critic single out a director or an actor, to say that an actor compensated for poor direction or writing, or that a director had a wonderful vision but was let down by the actors. Sometimes a critic will fault an actor or director for doing exactly what is called for in the stage directions. Rich, who said that assessing a director's role in a production was among his most difficult tasks, could be guilty of this, sometimes finding that the director did not give the actors the "help" they needed, other times seeing the actors as failing the director's vision, but he generally was circumspect in allocating who got the praise and blame.

Another "quality" Rich believed that critics should have is a detachment from the theatrical community. Here, Rich followed not his mentor Kerr, but Atkinson. Kerr had worked in the theatre as a writer, producer and director, as had his wife, Jean. He told stories of the conflicts that created; having to pan the play or performance of a friend, his only consolation being that "Maybe Brooks will like it."[73] Eight of the critics that Kalina Stefanova-Peteva interviewed in her book *Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?* said they saw no reason to refrain from being friends with people who work in the theatre; four, including Rich, disagreed.[74] Rich was always adamant about his relationship to the industry—"I don't see myself as part of the theatrical community in any sense"[75] —and made much of the fact that he did not attend theatre parties or the Tony awards and that he endorsed the *Times*'s decision to stop voting on the Tonys. "It isn't relevant to my job to know theater people," he has said. "They are so frequently interviewed by the *Times* and other publications that I can find out

[73]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 83.

[74]*Ibid.*, 93-98.

[75]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

what ideas are going."[76] Rich certainly didn't seem at a disadvantage; he went far beyond other critics in lacing his reviews with information about an artist's career.

Rich also frequently pointed out that he did not review the work of the people who had been his friends before he became the *Times*'s critic—most notably Wendy Wasserstein—because it would be difficult to be objective about their work. However, Michael Riedel, in his article, "What the Butcher Forgot to Tell You," said that Rich did in fact review the work of friends, pointing specifically to producer Evangeline Morphos's *Aven-U Boys* and shows produced by Rocco Landesman of the Nederlander organization.[77] But problems in this area can be practically unsolvable. Early in his career at the *Times*, Rich reviewed (favorably) *Lunch Hour*, a play by his friend Jean Kerr.[78] But if Rich had not reviewed the play, who would have? Walter Kerr, the playwright's husband? There is another thorny problem. The feeling exists that if the chief drama critic for the *Times* does not review a new Broadway play, it is getting short shrift. By trying to be objective and turning some plays over to a second- or third-string reviewer, Rich may have hurt the chances of those plays.

Late in Rich's tenure the question arose as to whether his flirtings with Hollywood constituted a conflict of interest. At one point, Rich was seen attending a performance of *Prelude to a Kiss* with Dawn Steel, a producer who worked at various times with both Columbia Pictures and Disney. Rich raved about *Prelude*—and Steel bid a million dollars for the movie rights. Rich said he saw no conflict of interest but, as Chip Brown wrote in his *GQ* article, "a critic

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[76]*Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 20.

[77]Michael Riedel, "What the Butcher Forgot to Tell You," *New York Daily News*, 20 February 1994, 3.

[78]Review of *Lunch Hour*, 13 November 1980, C19:1.

given to lecturing playwrights about what readers can smell will not always get the benefit of the doubt,"[79] a reference to Rich's response to David Hare in which he said that readers can smell when a writer is holding back and not telling the whole truth. In 1991, Rich had, in fact, written a screenplay. It had been commissioned by Herb Ross for Tri-Star in the late 1980's, but Ross had left the company by the time Rich finished the script. With the finished work left to languish on the shelf, the question of possible impropriety seemed moot.

A RICH REVIEW

What are the ingredients in a Frank Rich review?

Rich said his main purpose was to recreate the event for the reader:

> The creative part of the job, the reason I enjoy doing it, is to try to recreate for the reader the experience of what it was like to be in the theatre and see a particular play. If you do that, you increase the understanding of theatregoers who don't have the inclination or time to devote all their energies to thinking about theatre.[80]

Kerr is again Rich's example and again Rich pointed back to his youth. The *Times*'s extensive theatre coverage had him enamored of that paper and of Atkinson, but the young Frank who longed to *be* there, most coveted Kerr's reviews. For it was Kerr, then writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, who had the ability to describe a show in such a way, regardless of his opinion, that you could almost feel what it was like to see a particular show on a particular night.

Who would not have wanted to hurry to the Majestic Theatre to see *The Music Man* after spending an evening there, vicariously, with Kerr?:

> "It's the beat that does it," Kerr wrote in his 1957 review.
>
> The overture of *The Music Man* drives off with a couple of good, shrill whistles and a heave-ho blast from half the brass in the pit, with the

[79]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 177.

[80]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

> heartier trombonists lurching to their feet in a blare of enthusiasm. The curtain sails up to disclose the most energetic engine on the Rock Island Railroad—circa 1912—hurtling across the proscenium with real smoke pouring out of its smoke stack and real steam rolling along its rails. The itch is upon us. Inside a railway coach . . . joggle a carload of traveling salesmen, heads bobbing in rhythm over their spread-eagled newspapers, knees bouncing uncontrollably as River City, Iowa, tumbles into view. Meredith Wilson—librettist, composer and lyricist of the delightful new show at the Majestic—has whipped out an entire first choral scene without a note of music. The words, the hands, the knees, and the insane Rock Island roadbed do all the work: grunts, roars . . . and a form of St. Vitus Dance all merge into a syncopated conversation that is irresistible.

The rest of the review is as infectious, up to and including the understated final paragraph: "The beat is catchy; the audience was applauding in rhythm as last night's curtain came down. I think you'll have a good time."[81]

Rich, working in a different style than Kerr, also could make an event come alive, could instill a sense of excitement in a way that eludes many critics. Dennis Cunningham said that Rich's review of *Dancing at Lughnasa* "captured that play so much that I actually started getting tears in my eyes just reading his review."[82] Todd London said that Rich's emotionalism was, at worst, sentimental and awkward but, at best, he "could make statues weep."[83] And Paul Berman said of Rich: "He can make you feel the whole theater has risen cheering to its feet. He makes you feel what theater can do that movies cannot."[84]

Here is Rich describing the "aria of agonized passion" in the balcony scene of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Cyrano de Bergerac*: "As Derek Jacobi courted his unreachable Roxane from the shadows, the actor's voice

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[81]Walter Kerr, Review of *The Music Man*, *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 December 1957.

[82]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 161.

[83]London, "New Order at the *Times*," 91.

[84]Berman, "Is Theater Criticism Dead," 28.

Jacobi courted his unreachable Roxane from the shadows, the actor's voice rose in hurricane torrents of desire, until the mammoth Gershwin theater seemed to throb in cadence with the heartsick poetry."[85]

And Billie Whitelaw in Beckett's *Rockaby*: "In a 15-minute play that makes time stand still, the actress remained seated in a rocking chair. With the aid of only a recorded monologue of a mind's final thrashings and one repeated word of spoken dialogue (more), she stretched out and then snapped the final gasp of existence as if it were a rubber band."[86]

From *Jelly's Last Jam*: "But after watching the sizzling first act of 'Jelly's Last Jam,' at once rollicking and excessive, roofraising and overstuffed, you fly into intermission high on the sensation that something new and exciting is happening, whatever the wrong turns along the way."[87]

Here, Rich needs only a paragraph to grab his readers and plunk them down inside the theatre. Usually, Rich used the entire review to weave a spell, to convey the feel of what occurred at a particular theatre on a particular night. Excerpts below from *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun, Les Atrides, Amadeus*, and *Gypsy* give an indication of his skill, though even these long passages are less effective than a reading of the entire review.

In writing about *Four Baboons*, Rich, with much emphasis on the physical production, recreated the baffling world John Guare had himself created at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre:

> What greets us upon arrival in Peter Hall's commanding and poetic production is a classical set designed by Tony Walton, a mosaic-flecked disk that oozes smoke from a centerstage opening and is surrounded by mysterious detritus redolent of the Bronze Age. When the play starts, the

[85]Rich, "The Best May Be a Harbinger," II:3:1.

[86]*Ibid.*

[87]Review of *Jelly's Last Jam*, 27 April 1992, C11:1.

> first character to arrive is Eros (Eugene Perry), an Ariel-like sprite who sings his dialogue to melancholy operatic fragments. . . . Though [Stockard] Channing's reassuringly familiar, contemporary presence emerges soon after in Gap fashions, Mr. Guare removes her from the recognizable social circumstances of Manhattan, strips away all but a few jokes, abandons logical narrative and piles on myths, dreams and hallucinations, not to mention a quasi-Greek chorus of nine tart-tongued American children. . . .
>
> What is technically impressive about 'Four Baboons' is Mr. Guare's spare, incantatory and sometimes witty dialogue and metaphorical images that all merge in musical harmony by the final moments. He actually does create a modern mythological realm in which Alitalia Airlines, the Stanhope Hotel and Bellini cocktails can play as large a role as the metamorphoses of ancient legend, in which the cynical realities of present-day divorce can co-exist with an innocent faith in primal magic. . .
>
> Ms. Channing . . . seems to have become Mr. Guare's muse, as inseparable from his art as the love and loss and grief and hope that are his subject. Only those who hate emotions could be untouched by the sight of this woman rising from the ashes of unspeakable suffering to face a blinding new day's sun with eyes ablaze in joy.[88]

In his review of *Les Atrides*, Ariane Mnouchkine's four-play cycle presented at Brooklyn's Park Slope Armory, Rich first effectively described the claustrophobic feel, the sense of control exerted by the director who had locked her audience in the armory, and then he focused on the theatrical qualities of the production:

> But the most extraordinary coup de théâtre . . . arrives after the blood is spilled: as the lights dim to black and the barking of approaching dogs rises to a terrifying pitch, individual attempts to remove the bloodied mattress bearing the mutilated corpses of Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, come to nothing. Finally the entire chorus must advance to do the macabre deed, and the apocalyptic spectacle leaves the anxious audience in dread of an unchanging world in which blood inexorably begets blood and evil forces are never tamed. . . . Ms. Mnouchkine makes the most of her leaping chorus of Furies—snarling, mutated hellhounds, part canine, part simian, and reminiscent of the furious apes in Stanley Kubrick's "2001." . . . The dancing of the androgynous chorus . . . has a fervor, precision and ethereal lightness that cannot be matched. . . . Fierce dramatic images, often achieved with means as simple as the rushing forward of a platform or the tearing of a curtain,

[88]Review of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, 19 March 1992, C15:3.

abound.[89]

This is from *Amadeus*, the black comedy dominated by Ian McKellen's performance as the obsessed Salieri:

> It is [God] who is murdered in the angry and thrilling play that arrived in Peter Hall's triumphant production at the Broadhurst last night. . . . [Peter Shaffer] has created a scabrous portrait of the private Mozart and a speculative thriller about the composer's brief, unhappy life. . . . The wicked plot of "Amadeus" is merely a means for the playwright to present his view of the world—and a most contemporary and nihilistic view it is. If Mr. Shaffer shatters the audience's idealized illusions about his title character, he then goes on to smash our romantic illusions about ourselves. We . . . leave the theater possessed by the chilling central image that Mr. Shaffer and Mr. McKellen have created. That image is of Salieri keeling over in pain, crying out for deliverance from an inscrutable God. . . . "Amadeus" may be a play inspired by music and death, but it fills the theater with that mocking, heavenly silence that is the overwhelming terror of life.[90]

And from *Gypsy*, Rich's favorite musical, the one that recalls all the pain and sorrow of loss and abandonment:

> As I sat at [*Gypsy*'s] scorching new revival starring Tyne Daly, once again swept up in its goosebump-raising torrents of laughter and tears, I realized why, if anything, this 30-year-old show actually keeps improving with age. . . . "Gypsy" may be the only great Broadway musical that follows its audience through life's rough familial passages. A wrenching fable about a tyrannical stage mother and the daughters she both champions and cripples . . . [*Gypsy*] speaks to you one way when you are a child, then chases after you to say something else when you've grown up. . . .
>
> "Why did I do it? What did it get me?" Ms. Daly shouts as she accelerates into her final number, an aria of nervous breakdown titled "Rose's Turn." Rose is standing on an empty stage, at last deserted by everyone. . . . And as Ms. Daly stands there, crying her lungs out, demanding that a phantom audience give her a turn of her own in the spotlight—"Everything's coming up roses this time for me!"—one is confronted by a plea for recognition and love so raw and naked that Rose becomes a child again herself, begging as Louise and June once had for "Momma."

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[89]Review of *Les Atrides*, 6 October 1992, C11:3.

[90]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

> There's never any doubt that the much-married Rose and her lonely, bruised children are driven to perform before an audience, to be gypsies, because that's their only hope of being noticed—of getting the love and acceptance they have been denied in life.
>
> And might not the audience have its own deep needs in that respect? If "Gypsy" is the musical most beloved by theater fanatics, that may be because it forces those on both sides of the footlights to remember exactly why they turned to the theater as a home away from home.[91]

Rich's review of *'night Mother* had the same ineffably sad, harrowing quality as the play itself, and if his review of *Dancing at Lughnasa* did not actually bring tears to the eyes, it could not help but conjure up memories of unacknowledged longings and unarticulated thoughts, could not help but make real the encounter with Brian Friel's sadly wonderful people.

Several of these shows were among Rich's special favorites, ones he was passionate about, and therefore lent themselves to passionate reviews that could conjure up the feeling of being there. He also could bring his readers into the theatre to experience the show he passionately disliked, each eviscerating line adding to the audience's realization of what an inane, mind-numbingly boring, or amateurish evening's entertainment they had, thankfully, missed. It is difficult to find, among these negative reviews, any that recreated the event in such a way that they might have encouraged a reader to discount the unfavorable judgment and go anyway. Only an independent-minded reader on a virtual mission to ignore Rich would have been a likely audience member at Patrick Meyers's *Dysan*, for example:

> Only last month the venerable but slumping Circle Repertory Company seemed to have hit bottom with "Bing and Walker". . . But anyone who sees the new Circle Rep attraction, "Dysan," may well find himself wishing he were at a "Bing and Walker" revival. If "Dysan" doesn't prove to be the silliest play of 1985, it's not for lack of trying. A meditation on reincarnation, love and the decline of Western civilization, this work gives us a rough inkling of how Thornton Wilder might have written "The Skin

[91]Review of *Gypsy*, 17 November 1989, C5:1.

> of Our Teeth" if he'd fallen under the spell of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. . . .
>
> The cosmic has never exactly been Mr. Meyers' forte . . . but usually he's had the good sense to keep his Big Thoughts in partial check. That's not the case here. Among other things, "Dysan" talks about "the suffering yin of the universe" and the "illusion of rational existence." When a character announces that "the cobwebs of romanticism and sentiment have been vacuumed from my mind," we have to wonder if that vacuum didn't in fact effect a cleaner sweep than the playwright would have us believe. . . .
>
> Mr. Meyers's message, slow in coming and modestly coherent at best, seems to be that love . . . can triumph over religion, destiny, bad karma, the space program and, for all I could tell, hypoglycemia. On their way to this epiphany, the embarrassed actors must die at least a thousand more deaths than the characters they play. The nebbish-looking Mr. Stone, asked to deliver a satanically evangelical rock song, soon finds himself swamped by strobe lights and microphone feedback. Miss Cortez must slither about the stage simulating out-of-body orgasms. Mr. Weeks gets to . . . deliver what must be Mr. Meyers's most persuasive line: "I feel like I'm in a comic book."
>
> Then again, if "Dysan" is what passes for a comic book these days, the time may have come to return to the classicism of "Little Lulu."[92]

Rich was less successful in recreating the event with the show of mixed virtue, usually settling there for a dryer, less impressionistic view of the night's proceedings, giving the audience information but little feeling.

JUDGMENT

If Rich got credit from his critics for his ability to recreate the event for his readers, he got none for his next pronouncement—insisting that he did not enjoy judging a play:

> For me passing judgment on a play is absolutely the least interesting part of the job. It's obviously part of the job, I don't mean to deny it. But it would be extremely boring for me, or for any writer, to just say, this play is great or this one is terrible.[93]

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[92]Review of *Dysan*, 21 January 1985, C23:1.

[93]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

The debate here is wide-ranging, going far beyond particular concerns about Rich's work. Michael Kirby, coming from one extreme, asks for a ban on any kind of judgmental criticism. In his "Criticism: Four Faults," Kirby says that such criticism is primitive, naive, arrogant, and immoral, and bases his conclusion on four main points. First, all people don't perceive the world in the same way—a person with a good ear for music, for example, hears a piece differently than a person with no ear. So it is wrong for the critic to write as if everyone perceives the world as the critic does, and thus would enjoy or dislike the same things he does. Second, because no inherent value exists in the thing perceived, but exists rather in the one who perceives, critics are wrong to ascribe value to a performance. Third, saying "no" to any work of art is destructive and immoral. And fourth, value judgment in criticism is unnecessary because it actually fulfills none of the functions that it purports to: It isn't necessary for telling a spectator if he would enjoy the performance—a simple description would do just as well; it helps standardize taste, which is repressive; and its function as part of a historical record is not valuable, irreplaceable, or necessary.[94]

But readers expect a daily newspaper critic to make assessments of a play's worth; those critics who do not will not sustain a readership. With judgment comes responsibility. Many theatre practitioners say that, while some aspects of criticism might be useful to the artist, value judgments—saying "he was good," "she was bad," "I liked it"—are useless. (This argument would have little effect on Rich, who said he was not writing for the artist.) Most artists, and readers as well, would argue for, at the very least, judgment supported by evidence. Richard Palmer puts it this way in his book, *The Critics' Canon*:

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[94]Michael Kirby, "Criticism: Four Faults," *The Drama Review* (September 1974): 59-68.

> The assumed contract with the reader requires a critic to judge well on the basis of objective observations founded on knowledge and experience and to make clear the criteria on which judgments rest. Anything else abuses the prerogatives of the critic."[95]

Apart from larger issues of criticism, Rich's judgments drew particular ire. For, although he said he took little delight in this function, his tone indicated otherwise. As one friend of Rich's is reported to have said: "Frank is never in such a good mood as when he's eviscerating a play. There's a demonic glee; it's like he's speeding. He gets off on malice."[96]

Part of the problem stems from the fact that mixed reviews are the hardest for Rich or any critic to write, and he frequently opted instead for the pan or rave, reflecting both his own authoritative style and the hit-or-miss philosophy prominent in Broadway reviewing. Early in his career with the *Times*, he had a tendency to mitigate an unfavorable review by devoting time and praise to one aspect of the production, perhaps showing a love of theatre and a desire to give the artists at least something to take away with them. The tone of that changed during his tenure; though he still might give credit, there usually was little trace of the advocate. The mixed reviews had uncertain feels: Rich was more dismissive of the play *and* the review, as if getting it out of the way on his way to the next pan or rave.

Rich was what John Booth calls a "first paragraph killer."[97] Booth criticizes Rich for this tendency, arguing that, the more power a critic has, the more responsible he must be. To Booth, that translates into reserving judgment, especially negative judgment, until late in the review. That way, the reader gets

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[95]Palmer, *The Critics' Canon*, 8.

[96]Quoted in Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 179.

[97]Booth, *Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 148.

an idea about the production, may even have begun to make up his own mind, before it is trashed.

Rich did indeed skewer plays very early on, although, with a play he severely disliked, he was likely to run a stake through it in each succeeding paragraph as well. What reader would have wanted to pluck down $60 to see *Metro* after this opening line? "What's the Polish word for fiasco?"[98]

Was there any need looking for vital signs in *The Threepenny Opera*, starring Sting, after this opening paragraph"

> After emerging from the inert gray mass that is Broadway's "Threepenny Opera," the first thing you want to do—assuming you don't drink—is run home and listen to any available recording of its score. The reason is not to revisit the evening's high points—there are none—but to make sure you are still among the living.[99]

From *Carnage, A Comedy*:

> There may have been a more amateurish work than "Carnage" on a professional stage in New York this year, but somehow the gods spared me from seeing it.[100]

The Public Theatre production of *Cymbeline*:

> "Cymbeline," the late Shakespeare romance, is an exuberantly confusing play that has never wanted for detractors. . . . Samuel Johnson famously dismissed it as "unresisting imbecility" while Shaw, no Shakespeare fan, found it "stagey trash." Such critics have a new ally in the director JoAnne Akalaitis, who has mounted a travesty of "Cymbeline" at the Public Theater.[101]

The list of shows that received their death warrant in the first paragraph —*Tricks of the Trade, The Balcony Scene, Side Walkin', Metamorphosis, The*

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[98]Review of *Metro*, 17 April 1992, C1:3.

[99]Review of *The Threepenny Opera*, 6 November 1989, C13:4.

[100]Review of *Carnage, A Comedy*, 18 September 1989, C14:1.

[101]Review of *Cymbeline*, 1 June 1989, C15:1.

Prince of Central Park, Ghetto, Dangerous Games, Mixed Couples, Transcendental Love, Desperately Yours, Onward Victoria, One Tiger to a Hill, Criminal Minds, A Doll's Life, Sherlock's Last Case, Marilyn, Little Johnny Jones, Legs Diamond—goes on and on.

The problem here goes beyond the simple panning of a play. New Yorkers, always busy, may stop reading after that first paragraph, never learning enough about the show to see if they might like it. And this style, especially if it is entertaining, tends to put the reader on the side of the killing, not the play. The reader comes to expect, even look forward to the killing, and the cumulative effect over time can lead to an enjoyment of criticism but a negativity toward theatre.

Though Rich said that one of his standards—and one that the *Times* preaches—was to let the tone fit the circumstances, he often forgot this. As Martin Gottfried wrote, in meaning to slap a wrist, Rich would up breaking an arm.[102] This, according to Hare, was part of the problem in the *Secret Rapture* controversy. Rich could have written in such a way that he made his points about the play's problems but still left it with a chance to survive, let viewers make up their own minds, instead of writing in such a way as to "guarantee" the play's early closing.

This harshness, in conjunction with the power issue, was the most heated criticism of Rich and, like the power issue, it was magnified because he did not acknowledge it. In "Exit the Critic," he defended himself for being tough on plays, but not for the personal tone he took.

Other critics have labored in personal rather than impersonal criticism. George Jean Nathan said, "To ask a critic to keep himself out of his criticism is

[102]Gottfried, "Frank Rich Defended," 25.

like asking an actor to keep himself out of his role."[103] But, because of his influence, Rich drew more ire than anyone, with the possible exception of the vituperative John Simon.

Personal criticism takes two forms. One has the critic putting himself into the review. Although Rich's style did not call attention to the fact that he was simply one fellow voicing a personal, biased opinion, still he did bring his hopes, his background, his experiences—in today's parlance, his baggage—to his reviews. This showed most in reviews of plays about alienation and loss. Here, he wrote with humanity, empathy, and understanding. It was woven throughout the review but came through most clearly in his summations.

The second form of personal criticism is to focus on—even attack—individuals. David Mamet, much of whose work was lauded by Rich, still said of him, "His stock in trade is *ad hominem* argument and he does it consistently and recognizably and it seems to be that for which he has been hired."[104] When Rich found a show unworthy he could write about the writer, director, and actors as if he had been personally affronted by them. But the harshness was almost always tied to the play; rarely did Rich seem to be panning an individual because he disliked the person. There were exceptions. The feeling of personal distaste seeped through even in his less caustic comments about a few artists, notably Andrew Lloyd Webber and, later in her career, JoAnne Akalaitis, and he might take shots at them even in reviews of other people's work.

In his book, *The Critics' Canon*, one of the things that Richard Palmer asks of his critic is that the amount of positive and negative writing in the review

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[103]George Jean Nathan, *The Critic and the Drama* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), 121.

[104]Booth, *Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 25.

reflect the overall review. Predictably it was with the mixed review—the hardest to write—that Rich might not do this. In the mixed review, Rich showed a certain generosity, for he most often spent the early part of the review dealing with the play's virtues, shifting typically in the fifth or seventh paragraph to its shortcomings. This might catch the reader by surprise, but it is only the nature of a mixed review and did not signify an imbalance. Sometimes, however, after spending three-fourths or more of the review on a play's good points, Rich could criticize a play harshly enough in the last paragraph or two to render what had gone before ineffectual. Even this might be seen as a certain generosity; turnabouts of this sort outnumbered those in which Rich spent much time lambasting a play only to admit its worth at the end, diffusing, at least in part, the charge that he could nitpick to death what was essentially a worthwhile play.

Martin Gottfried, Rich's sometime defender, said that Rich occasionally misjudged important works by overemphasizing their minor flaws. Gottfried gave *Grand Hotel* as an example,[105] but Rich would not have agreed with that. He thought *Grand Hotel* stunning visually, but said the performances, the score, the material itself were mediocre at best. It is difficult to put those elements—performances, score, material—in the category of minor flaws.

The question has long been raised of whether critics should modify their standards in accordance with the intentions and ambitions of the work they are reviewing. Some critics have different standards for what they might consider harmless fun. Even John Simon wrote of distinguishing between types of efforts:

> There is, however, the show with little or no pretension to truth, depth, social significance, or artistic quality; the show content to entertain on a level of craft just above standard television fare. Such a show—if it is charming, skillful, unassuming—should be patted on the back by the

[105]Gottfried, "Frank Rich Defended," 26.

> critic. Not too firmly, mind you, lest it collapse but just enough to propel it into the world, where it will do no great good or harm, but spread some guiltless contentment.[106]

Rich was most enamored of shows from which he could extract deep meaning and link it to the world outside the theatre and he could be dismissive of shows that didn't accomplish, or even attempt, that lofty goal. But this was not always so. Examples can be found on both sides of the case. If a production, regardless of its modest ambitions, struck him as pretentious or sloppy, he could lash out without restraint. *Florida Crackers, In a Pig's Valise, Carnage, Beside Herself, Dangerous Games, Sid Caesar and Company, Merlin, The Balcony Scene, Stepping Out, Romance in Hard Times* all set out to do little more than entertain and were dealt with ruthlessly for not doing it.

On the other hand, he could give credit to a work that set out with no grand ambitions and lived up to its modest intentions. *A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking* is a "slight," but funny play.[107] *Brother Truckers* is without redeeming social value of any kind—and that is okay.[108] *Lunch Hour* is "a very slight, very warm and most amusing diversion."[109] " 'Skirmishes ' is a small, quiet work that does everything it wants to do with precision and grace."[110] Michael Frayn's *Wild Honey*, adapted from an untitled play by Chekhov, has its problems—it doesn't sustain the laughter and Ian McKellen's exaggerated performance borders on camp—but Rich gave Frayn credit for achieving "his

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[106]John Simon, "Innocent Merriment," *New York*, 26 January 1987, 63.

[107]Review of *A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking*, 2 May 1980, C2:5.

[108]Review of *Brother Truckers*, 22 September 1992, C13:3.

[109]Review of *Lunch Hour*, 13 November 1980, C19:1.

[110]Review of *Skirmishes*, 3 January 1983, C17:4.

goal, as stated in his published introduction, of making 'a text for production' rather than an academic contribution or a pious tribute."[111]

One area in which Rich noticeably reined in the acrimony was with new playwrights. "With an unknown writer, if I hear what to me is a voice, I'm willing to give that credit out of proportion and note, but not emphasize, things I regard as a lack of experience," Rich said.[112] He spoke of being willing to wait for a writer's craft to catch up to what the writer was trying to say. Tom Torpor's play *Nuts* had debilitating problems but Rich went out of his way twice in the review to give the playwright credit for something he had done. Peter Rheim's *Life and Limb*, Eduardo Machado's early *Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa*, Lynda Barry's *The Good Times are Killing Me*, Mark St. Germain's *Out of Gas on Lovers Leap*, and Matt Williams's *Between Daylight and Boonville* offer similar examples.[113] "Keep an eye out for . . . [Matt] Williams. . . ," Rich said. "When this playwright stops worrying about textbook notions of drama and starts trusting his own best instincts, it's quite possible that he'll create a truly special evening of theater."

Rich was not always lenient with young writers. He had little tolerance for sloppy craftsmanship and none at all for pretension. If he didn't hear a "voice," if he felt that a young writer was trying simply to manufacture a play from formula, he said so. It is somewhat ironic that Rich, who would later call *Angels in America* the most thrilling play of his adult lifetime, was particularly harsh with a

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[111]Review of *Wild Honey*, 19 December 1986, C3:1.

[112]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[113]Reviews of *Nuts*, 27 April 1980, C7:4; *Life and Limb*, 25 January 1985, C3:1; *Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa*, 27 January 1983, C15:3; *The Good Times are Killing Me*, 19 April 1991, C3:1, *Out of Gas on Lovers Leap*, 3 May 1985, C3:3; *Between Daylight and Boonville*, 18 September 1980, C17:1.

young writer named Tony Kushner. Rich called Kushner's writing in *A Bright Room Called Day* "speechifying" and "textbookese" and complained of his "juvenile line of attack," "clumsily executed theatrical crosscutting," "nominal narrative," and "ramblings."[114]

Rich might seem harsh because of, what some saw as, his unrealistically high standards. Glenn Loney said: "Frank Rich is very intelligent and very clever, but his high standards have been unrealistic. He wants a theater of perfection, which is impossible in our time."[115] And Bernard Jacobs of the Shubert Organization said that Rich was too tough because "He wants to apply standards which he thinks the theater should achieve, but which it may not be possible for it to actually achieve."[116]

Rich admitted that the complaints, the incessant debates made him question his own standards late in his tenure:

> The constant carping also left me wondering whether my own standards were indeed too tough for the tourist arena the Broadway theater had become. Since those standards were inseparable from who I am, I couldn't have changed them even if I wanted to. But was it worth applying them to a Broadway where the apex of achievement in the 1980's was "Cats"?[117]

In his own defense, Rich raised an often repeated refrain: that, while the theatre industry often thought he was too unforgiving, readers more often wrote him because he had been too easy on a play. That is understandable, he said, because anyone who loves the theatre enough to become a critic will be more forgiving than the audience member who sees only a few plays.

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[114]Review of *A Bright Room Called Day*, 8 January 1991, C11:1.

[115]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 85.

[116]*Ibid.*, 166.

[117]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 50-51.

Anyone who was the recipient of so much ill will probably would take the time to question his standards and his performance; it's difficult to march on unquestioningly, with the idea that everyone is out of step but you. But whatever internal debate he waged, Rich never came across in his writing as someone who doubted himself. It seems likely that, if *Cats* were the height of achievement for a decade—and if he could do little to touch *Cats*—he would only redouble his efforts to weed out those unworthy efforts that he did have power over.

Critics have always made judgment calls and they have always defended that right, with arguments ranging from the lofty to the mundane. Stanley Kauffmann said:

> [The critic] ought to live in hope that the truth, the true art, is continually en route—and does in fact occasionally appear. Part of his function is to make sure false messiahs and peddlers and charlatans are shown as such. Hope—non-delusionary, non-inflationary, non-self-aggrandizing hope—is the core of the critic's being; hope that good work will recurrently arrive, hope that (in part by identifying trash) he may help it to arrive, hope he may . . . connect that good work with its audience.[118]

Most critics have defended themselves with this "service to the theatre" line of reasoning.

Rich also emphasized the idea that there is no "right" or "wrong" about the judgment of a play's worth. But his way of writing in the authoritative voice and his harsh tone belied this. Why expend that much energy and virulence if there is no right or wrong? It is almost impossible to find a Rich review that says, explicitly or implicitly, "This is what I think, but you decide for yourself." The attitude is not, "Here is an opinion," but rather, "Here is truth."

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[118]Stanley Kauffmann, "Why Do Critics Persist," in *Persons of the Drama* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 340.

STANDARDS

Like most critics, Rich said he did not have a predetermined checklist that he took to the theatre with him; he said he went open-minded, curious. He said he didn't read a script of a new play before seeing it and only rarely did he do any research—if a play dealt with a historical event or was primarily concerned with a subject about which he had no knowledge at all. "I try to go with my mind clear, have a spontaneous, gut reaction to what I see, and then afterward at the typewriter or word processor, figure out why I had that reaction," he said.[119] "I don't walk in with a report card check list. Nothing would ever measure up."[120]

In the next chapter, we will look closely at the theatrical criteria that Rich applied. For now, we can say that Rich did bring his predilections and standards with him to the theatre, though no more so than most mainstream critics. If a work made no pretense at trying for something out of the ordinary Rich invariably applied conventional rules of dramaturgy. He wanted his writing to explore universal truths through specific incidents, his characters to be real not stereotypes, his humor to come from character not be pasted on, his themes to be inherent and subtle not polemic, his actors to inhabit their roles, his design to be integrated. If a work had its own set of rules, Rich might or might not grant it some leeway. He didn't object out of hand to a work using tools or elements different than the ordinary ones (movement instead of character, visuals instead of plot), though it was harder for these works to impress or satisfy him. He was less lenient toward a work's unconventional intentions, what effect it was trying to produce on an audience. Rich liked that which was daring, in his words, but even the daring fell into a certain, largely conventional, mold that he had set up.

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[119]Stern, "Drama Critic Frank Rich," 46.

[120]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 3.

(Rich said that he liked the way Brooks Atkinson wrote about *Waiting for Godot.* Atkinson said he could not really describe the play and wasn't certain that he understood it, but that it affected him and people should go see it. Rich might have liked this in Atkinson but it was not something we saw him often doing in his own reviews.)

Rich came to his conclusions about how well a production met these standards—conventional or more adventuresome—through analysis and impression or, better put, through analysis leading to impression. Impression, however, had the upper hand. Rich was not as strong at dissecting a play structurally as he was at extracting themes and ideas and providing insights into them.

Rich didn't simply say, "I liked it," or "I hated it," or "She was good." He gave reasons for his feeling about the production and the specific elements that led to that feeling. *A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking* is funny because John Ford Noonan has flawless timing as a jokesmith, says Rich, but the play is mostly insubstantial because Noonan doesn't dip beneath the surface of the characters.[121] Bill Irwin's *Largely New York* falls short of being outstanding because of its too-even tempo, its excessive length, and because it doesn't offer Irwin an artistic stretch.[122] If the focus of the review was on the acting, Rich would enumerate specific things the actor had done. Ian McKellen "turns ashen" in one scene of *Amadeus*, later he will "explode in a wounding paroxysm of self hate," still later he "disintegrates" into the aged, cackling Salieri.[123] If the focus was elsewhere, he might simply mention the actor, but

[121]Review of *A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking*, 2 May 1980, C2:5.

[122]Review of *Largely New York*, 2 May 1989, C15:1.

[123]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

usually would try to give some idea of what quality the actor had to add to the role. Keith Carradine is unpretentious, warm and full of good humor—the characteristics that he needs as Will Rogers.

If the design work was integral to his feeling about a show, Rich would weave it throughout the review, discussing specifically how it contributed. For *The Will Rogers Follies*, Tony Walton

> daringly builds his set around a material as humble if pertinent as rope. The props alone—rope phones, suitcases, doors, are . . . worthy of museum exhibition. . . . The bygone whimsy of a vaudeville past missing elsewhere in these "Follies" can always be found in Mr. Walton's fantasies, among them backdrops that render the totems of Rogers's career (sagebrush, Hollywood greenbacks) in iconography true to both Ziegfeld overkill and the abstract tenets of modern theatrical art.[124]

In the same way that Rich never said simply "I liked it," neither did he simply point something out without relating it to his impressions. If he described the costumes as "a riot of colors," it is because the show overall evoked the "slick Broadway production values" of the past.[125]

Santo Loquasto's set for *The Secret Rapture* is not simply "bad," it is a lost chance because "England is as much a character as the play's people." Kenneth Foy's scenery and Theoni V. Aldredge's costumes in *Gypsy* are good *because* they turn the St. James Theater into "a credible stop on the battered two-a-day road that reaches its dead end in burlesque during the era of talkies and the Depression." Andy Stacklin's set for *A Lie of the Mind* creates a literal gulf to match the figurative one set up by Sam Shepard. The design for *Mad Forest*, a play about the nightmarish world of Ceausescu's Rumania, is a Chinese box of "shadowy Kafkaesque cul-de-sacs." In *I Hate Hamlet*, the

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[124]Review of *The Will Rogers Follies*, 2 May 1991, C17:1.

[125]Review of *And the World Goes Round: The Songs of Kandor and Ebb*, 19 March 1991, C11:2.

"fabulously glossy set by Tony Straiges, silver-screen moonlight by Paul Gollo and hokey old-time background music by Kim Sherman" evoke the Hollywood and Broadway of John Barrymore.[126]

Rich said that a critic must be as specific as possible about why he does or does not like something. If the critic does this, the reader will become familiar with that critic's likes and dislikes over a period of time and can make educated choices about the critic's recommendations. In his response to Hare, Rich wrote:

> I must fully disclose my honest opinion in reviews, not couch it in code phrases as you suggest—and then let the readers accept it or reject it on the basis of my ability to argue my position. . . . They come to know a critic over time, learn his or her tastes, and take any review in that context.[127]

Rich said that this is what he wants as a reader of criticism:

> If a critic puts all his cards on the table and describes what he saw, and doesn't just give an opinion, but explains by what experiences and analyses he's reached that opinion, a reader can say: I see why this critic didn't like it, but the event is so clear to me that I know my taste is different from his, and half of the reason he didn't like it is a reason I would like to see it.[128]

It is not unusual to hear the theatre community asking for more "constructive criticism." If the term means no more than simply encouraging people to see shows—regardless of their worth—any critic would denounce the practice. That does little more than help kill the audience and encourage mediocrity. David Richards makes the additional point that this is not a practice

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[126]Reviews of *The Secret Rapture*, 27 October 1989, C3:1; *Gypsy*, 17 November 1989, C5:1; *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1; *Mad Forest*, 5 December 1991, C15:3; and *I Hate Hamlet*, 9 April 1991, C13:3.

[127]Witchel, "Hare-Rich Correspondence," 26.

[128]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 54.

followed in any other walk of life. No one is encouraged to patronize a below-average doctor or dentist or museum exhibition—or even a movie.[129]

Constructive criticism can mean offering supportive advice to artists, and some critics have made a practice of this. Alexander Woollcott was known to suggest a different way an actor might have played a role and to chide certain artists for not taking on weightier, more meritorious work. Clive Barnes has earned a certain reputation for this kind of criticism while at the *New York Post*; he is sometimes seen as actively countering the harshness coming from the *Times*. Several producers have cited Elliot Norton, a former critic in Boston, for helping improve shows during their tryout period with his incisive, constructive comments. Atkinson, too, was known for his gentle nudges.

Rich was not a "constructive" critic in these senses. Because Rich supported his impressions with reasons, it was possible for artists to learn from his reviews. But even when he was being gentle toward a new writer's flaws, he did not suggest alternatives; and, if in his unfavorable reviews he caustically said that a writer should have spent more time on construction and less on grandiose themes, it hardly came across as constructive.

AUDIENCE RESPONSE

A theatre critic doesn't watch a play in a vacuum, neither does he, like a movie critic, watch in a small screening room along with a few other critics. The theatre critic watches with an audience, sometimes a hand-picked audience chosen to be there precisely because the critic is there, friends, fans and supporters who are going to like what they see on stage whatever it might be. The critic often has the added inducement of the show's producers sitting in the row behind, breathing good thoughts—and pressure—down his neck. Should

[129] *Ibid.*, 90.

the critic take audience response into account? Many have, including Rich's mentor, Walter Kerr. But Rich said no: "I'm not being paid to be a pollster, to sample audience response."[130]

Every critic is aware of the cheerleader factor. Rich said the most enthusiastic response he ever saw for a play was for a revival of *Little Johnny Jones*, with the audience cheering, throwing confetti and waving flags they had been given.[131] Rich was not swayed. The play got poor reviews—from him and other reviewers—and closed after one night.

Keeping perspective works both ways. Rich attended plays that many in the audience intensely disliked. But he liked them and said so in his reviews. *Sunday in the Park with George* and Jules Feiffer's *Grown Ups* are two examples; in both cases, people were walking out halfway thorough the performances that Rich reviewed. Rich said of *Grown Ups*:

> It would have been wrong for me to deny my own opinion and say, "This audience hated it." You don't want to compromise a review . . . by trying to guess what the audience will like. You have to go with what you believe.[132]

Producers don't necessarily want a critic to change his mind based on the response of a friend-packed audience (though they wouldn't protest too much if he did). Their complaint comes when a critic's response is totally out of sync with the audience response that they consistently, legitimately, see. It galls them that the critic is the only one in the audience who gets to write a review and that his negative response, the only one widely disseminated, leaves the impression that everyone disliked the show. At least when you pan a show, they

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[130] *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 26.

[131] *Ibid.*

[132] *Ibid.*

say, acknowledge that other people enjoyed it.

Some critics did this. Kerr had strong views about the audience's part in the theatrical process. If a play doesn't touch a "commonness" in the audience to bring a "single unified response," it hasn't performed its function and "doesn't exist as a play at all," he said.[133] Clive Barnes said that he uses the first person largely to indicate when his response seems to be at odds with the majority. Other critics have not been averse to reporting that, while they were fighting back yawns, others were applauding or laughing.

Not Rich. To acknowledge a different response from the audience would give the impression that the writer's opinion was but one of many—all equally valid—and, as we will see in detail in Chapter Four, this was not Rich's way. It would undermine the voice of authority. There is at best a minuscule number of reviews in which Rich gave an indication that the audience had liked a play that he had not, and there he wrote in such a tone as to leave no doubt about who was wrong and who was right. Neither did Rich mention when he was almost alone in liking something. Though he wrote in later articles about the audience walking out on *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Grown Ups*, his reviews at the time gave no hint of that. Rich did qualify his response to *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, a troubled and troubling play that spoke deeply to him:

> For the audience, it's a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. One either accepts Mr. Guare's reverie on its own exotic terms from the start or is shut out entirely, with no clearly marked route back in. "Four Baboons" is certain to produce what might be called the "Sunday in the Park With George" effect on any row of spectators: some will be dozing at the end of its 80 minutes, others will be actively hostile, others will be sobbing. I can understand all these points of view, but I can only speak from the perspective of someone who was deeply stirred by this play. . . .[134]

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[133]Bladel, *Walter Kerr*, 22.

[134]Review of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, 19 March, C15:3.

Rich's response to producers who bemoan the fact that a critic pans a play that the audience apparently loves harks back to his old line: "Critics don't close plays; producers close plays." If the audience loves the play, a producer can wait out the effects of a negative review and word-of-mouth will take over.

Rich frequently saw productions more than once. Not often but sometimes this was to see if he had been mistaken in his original impression. He said that, although his opinion might at times have undergone a minor change, he never experienced a 180-degree turn, and even a small change probably was attributable to a loss of spontaneity.[135] Rich used these—the lack of major changes, and the loss of spontaneity—as reasons for not reviewing a play a second time, something he often was asked to do for the sake of fairness by producers and artists. Rich said, if anything, he may have sometimes overpraised a production, noting *The Little Foxes* with Elizabeth Taylor and *La Cage aux Follies*. There are fewer efforts that he felt he underpraised, citing only *Nicholas Nickleby* in "Exit."[136]

[135]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 3.

[136]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 53.

CHAPTER THREE
FRANK RICH AND THEATRE

His critics paint a picture of Frank Rich as a man who had a meager aesthetic, who was indifferent to the classics, dismissive of the avant-garde, blind to innovation, sitting squarely in the middle of the road being taken in by glamour and sentimentality and all the excesses of the commercial theatre. That theatre, thanks to Rich, is home to safe, consumer-oriented, conventional, and predictable plays, while more original, risky, and penetrating works sit on the outside looking in.

Rich was part of a "new aesthetic populism," said Robert Brustein. He and critics like him don't develop the audience's taste, they follow it. They force art into adopting a bottom-line mentality that spreads from New York outward and allows sustained life only to critically approved, recycled Broadway and off Broadway hits. Incapable of distinguishing between the purposes of commercial and nonprofit theatres, Rich and his breed are unresponsive to radical, provocative work and see resident theatre only as "a breeding ground for Broadway or for the latest Yuppie fashions."[1]

Not a pretty picture. And, according to other of Rich's critics, not an accurate one. He was *not* consumer oriented, they say, and, so far from being hospitable to the commercial theatre, he was hostile. He was harsh and unyielding and had unrealistically high expectations of what theatre can do.

Not a pretty picture. And, this time according to Rich, still not an accurate one. Rich insisted that he was an eclectic, not a polemic, critic: that he found value in all theatre and believed that everything could be done well or badly, not that some kinds of theatre are essentially good and some essentially bad. "I

[1]Robert Brustein, "Akalaitis Axed," *The New Republic* vol. 208 (26 April 1993): 30.

don't feel the critic's place is to be sort of a cultural tzar who says, 'This kind of playwriting is bad, and this is good!' I've never tried to do that," Rich maintained.[2] He said that he cared greatly about the classics; that he saw a limited amount of experimental theatre but liked much of what he saw; that, yes, he liked much of the glamor of Broadway, if it was well-done, but he wasn't "taken in" by it; that not only did he not ignore penetrating, daring writing, but he demanded it from the best works; that his expectations were high, but not unreasonably so; and that he did not want to crush the commercial theatre, only to see it get better.

The discrepancy is at least partly relative. Rich said he spent his entire tenure calling out for more daring plays. To him, that was a *Marvin's Room* that looked at death without self-pity or an *Eastern Standard* that treated homosexual and heterosexual couples equally. But to Brustein, that was the safe, centrist viewpoint that made the Rich canon one playwright cloned over and over. Rich wanted more "disruptive" theatre. To him, that meant an *Aunt Dan and Lemon* that made an audience supply its own counterarguments to fascism. To the *Village Voice*, on the other hand, disruptive might mean audience members offering their own plot, their own set, even their own bodies to the cause.

To those critics who said that he savaged commercial theatre, Rich could point to glowing reviews for *Les Misérables, Miss Saigon, Guys and Dolls*, and *Gypsy*. Producers could point right back to a slew of closing notices for plays that found no favor with Rich.

What did Frank Rich look for in a play? When we examine his reviews

[2]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 61.

we find that he admired qualities in acting, directing, and playwriting that would be taught in any Theatre 101 class but are none the less valid. He liked writing that didn't provide pat answers or characters who were mere mouthpieces; he liked acting that took risks, that was intelligent, that took into account the silences; he liked directing that established a coherent vision and carried it through; he liked design that was integral to that vision, not simply tacked on willy-nilly.

We also find that Rich was, before anything else, a critic of writing. He didn't shortchange acting, he may have sometimes shortchanged directing, and he was as astute and as gracious toward design as any critic of his time. Before turning to acting, directing, and design, we will look at Rich's views on writing under these headings: Structure, Plot, Metaphor, Character, Polemics, "Total" Theatre, Daring, Voice, Unconventional Works, Musicals, Classics, Linking, Themes, Humanity.

STRUCTURE

Rich did not like formulaic plays and was often seen as a foe of the well-made play as well. He criticized "prefab plots" and writers who tried to concoct a play by the numbers. P.J. Barry's *The Octette Bridge Club* is a "synthetic" play that has been "mechanically mapped out according to an open-and-shut formula,"[3] and *Meet Me in St. Louis* is a "paint-by-numbers" effort that fails in part because it is so obviously an attempt to "manufacture a Broadway hit." Such assembly-line plays will never "soar above the lumpy sum" of their parts.[4] Rich was even more critical of the "lazy" writer who did not know his craft.

[3]Review of *The Octette Bridge Club*, 6 March 1985, C17:1.

[4]Review of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 3 November 1989, C3:1.

craft. In a 1981 article, he condemned the tendency of playwrights to forget the "grammar of [their] craft" and said that plays riddled with structural flaws preclude from the outset even the possibility of drama.[5] He chastised authors for focusing on secondary characters at the expense of the protagonist, for withholding critical information until late in the play, for contrived or artificially delayed plot revelations, for tossing in innovation for innovation's sake without making use of whatever its peculiar advantages might be. He castigated the author of *The First* for keeping his protagonist, Jackie Robinson, on hold while he focused on the secondary character of Leo Durocher. *Ned and Jack* is crippled by the author's wrong-headed decision to not disclose one character's terminal illness until Act II. Leigh Curran overloads her play *Alterations* with so many problems to be solved that "dramatic gridlock" sets in. Curran is unable to deal with any of the problems or characters in depth. She doesn't bring about any real change or resolution to her characters; she simply "dispose[s] of them as quickly as possible, like a juggler dropping her balls."[6] The decision to tell *Merrily We Roll Along* in reverse order proves futile. The creators were so enamored of the idea of telling the story backward they "never got around to the underlying purpose of the exercise"; that is, digging into the "psychological roots of the characters."[7] Although Rich praised non-naturalistic plays for not feeling obligated to have a beginning, a middle and an end—"scenes that start in the middle and end abruptly, can make theatre exciting"[8]—he disliked plays that were *unintentionally* so shapeless that they could begin or end anywhere.

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[5]Frank Rich, "Should We Expect Magic to Happen When a Theater's Lights Darken?" *New York Times*, 10 December 1981, C21:1.

[6]Review of *Alterations*, 31 October 1986, C3:1.

[7]Rich, "Should We Expect Magic," C21:1.

[8]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

More than anywhere else, Rich saw the need for craftsmanship in farce and comedy and allowed something akin to formula there. He talked about farce living or dying on its "clockwork machinery,"[9] and admitted that he was dazzled by the construction of *Noises Off* even when simply reading the play. Rich said that the Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur standard, *The Front Page*, could be appreciated not so much as a play, as "an efficient machine . . . for manufacturing mirth."[10] He more than once praised Neil Simon's "sheer playwriting craft."[11] (However, even in comedy, Rich demanded more than craftsmanship for the play to go to the next level. When, in his review of *Broadway Bound*, Rich called Simon Broadway's most successful practitioner of "tidy dramaturgy," that was *not* the compliment; the real compliment was that Simon "continues to enhance the complexity" of his writing.[12])

Even devotion to craftsmanship can be carried too far. Steve Metcalfe valued symmetry so much in *Viking* that he "wrote the life out of the play," and Hugh Leonard's *A Life*, though a good play, needed to be "more artful and less craftsmanlike."[13] Technique must be guided by inventiveness and the dramatic imagination.

PLOT

Adamant as he was about structure, Rich did not dwell on plot; it was not what propelled a show to the next level for him. He rarely afforded more than

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[9]Review of *Benefactors*, 23 December 1985, C11:1.

[10]Review of *The Front Page*, 24 November 1986, C13:1.

[11]Frank Rich, "True to Form, the Theater Was Full of Surprises," *New York Times*, 28 December, 1986, II:3:1.

[12]Review of *Broadway Bound*, 5 December 1986, C3:1.

[13]Reviews of *Viking*, 10 November 1980, C17:5; and *A Life*, 3 November 1980, C13.1.

one or two sentences to plot per se, and did not set aside a section of his review for it. Instead he weaved bits and pieces throughout the review, using it to make a larger point about something the writer, the director, an actor had done. He did this skillfully enough that the reader was satisfied and felt neither confused nor shortchanged. This was, in fact, one of his finest skills, but one that was taken for granted. Reading Rich on a frequent basis, it was easy to overlook how little he needed to rely on plot, how able he was to intertwine into one insightful, readable review everything he wanted said, including just the right amount of plot. Rich made this determination early in his career: "I've always been convinced that . . . readers don't want to read about plot in reviews. I'm not needed to serve that function, to summarize plot." A review that dwells on plot can close a play off from further discussion rather than opening it up. Such a review doesn't allow the reader to see that the play "may be about all these things that are not directly in the plot . . . things to think about and that leave you hanging, things you're going to have to see for yourself and figure out for yourself."[14] Rich also said, and his reviews verified, that he liked best those plays that "defy literal-minded explications of plot and character."[15]

Rich took for granted the need for sound structure and good plot—in plays that have a plot—and demanded more. In a 1988 article about Tony nominees *M. Butterfly, Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *Speed-the-Plow*, Rich wrote: "These are crackling good tales, to be sure, and each play could be enjoyed with great pleasure simply for the humor and surprises with which its author speeds the narrative plow." But, he said, all the plays do more; what lifts them into the "realm of exciting theater" is the author's ability to "find drama in

[14]Rich, interview with the author.

[15]Frank Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," *New York Times*, 29 December 1985, II:5:1.

the spaces . . . beneath and beyond the visible surfaces of everyday existence."[16] Rich found this in the best writers and the best plays. Pinter is a master at "working between the lines."[17] In *Lilly Dale*, Horton Foote "uncovers the discrepancies between what little the characters articulate and what they actually feel" and so finds the "psychologically subterranean drama," and, in Foote's *The Widow Claire*, the few dramatic actions of the inarticulate, sensitive Horace Robedaux "are of minor moment next to what he doesn't do and doesn't say."[18] *Dancing at Lughnasa* has its share of evocative, telling words, but what matters most is what happens between the words, in the gestures, the music, the silences, the expressions, and the suppressed emotions.[19]

METAPHOR, MYTH AND POETRY

Rich liked writing that delved into the characters instead of skimming the surface, writing that took chances and offered insight, writing that was subtle not polemic, that was compassionate but not sentimental, that was elliptical with answers no more easy nor firmly resolved than those found in real life, that didn't simply state the obvious as if the audience were simple-minded. He didn't like manufactured histrionics, willed platitudes, general homilies, bombshells preceded by thematic pronouncements, greeting-card lines, cloudy, murky talk, contrived plot devices, announcing rather than dramatizing events, or self-indulgent, solipsistic writing that offerred characters who were

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[16]Frank Rich, "A Vintage Year in the Theater for Eastern Sissy Writers," *New York Times*, 5 June 1988, II:1:1.

[17]Review of *Mountain Language* and *Birthday Party*, 9 November 1989, C21:3.

[18]Reviews of *Lily Dale*, 21 November 1986, C3:1; and *The Widow Claire*, 18 December 1986, C13:1.

[19]Review of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 26 October 1991, C1:4.

mouthpieces for the playwright. He asked that authors ache for their characters and paint them through precise details. Above all, the writing must be compelling. A play can be sincere, intelligent, humorous, but if it is not compelling, it will not be good theatre.

For Rich, good writing often has a poetic dimension, a heightened language with a theatrical element that transports the audience further than utilitarian dialogue that is meant to be lifelike but is often only a flat, stale version of realistic dialogue. This can be expressed in myriad ways, in a dozen styles and periods. There is the poetry of Beckett, with its drama, humor and horror; a poetry of detail, as when Krapp remembers "a girl in a shabby green coat on a railway-station platform" or a "small, old, black, hard, solid rubber ball" surrendered to a dog.[20] There is the "inseparable" poetry, action, and content of Sam Shepard,[21] the plush imagery—the kind that modern playwrights have "ceded to novelists"—of Tina Howe,[22] and the rich mixture of humor, anger, poetry, and social observation that make August Wilson's plays seem to "sing even when [they are] talking."[23]

The best of plays also deal, one way or another, with metaphor; not simply within dialogue but metaphor that embraces the whole structure of a play. *Angels in America* is almost too rich to take in, it is such a cornucopia of "dense imagery and baroque spiritual, political and historical metaphor."[24] Rich wrote very favorably of Tina Howe's *Coastal Disturbances.* His review doted on

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[20]Review of *Krapp's Last Tape*, 5 September 1986, C3:1.

[21]Review of *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[22]Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

[23]Review of *The Piano Lesson*, 17 April 1990, C13:4.

[24]Review of *Angels in America*, 10 November 1992, C15:3.

Dennis Parichy's lighting because it brilliantly illuminates the spectrum of weather on New England beaches but, more than that, it presents a transitory sky "pregnant with the volatile possibilities of precipitous change" where "the weather above is inevitably a metaphor for human frissons below." The characters' emotions, like the weather, well up unexpectedly, their "emotional cloudbursts" match the heavenly ones. Howe understands that the things in her characters' lives, her characters themselves, like the weather, must keep changing, keep moving. The design adds to this by creating the illusion of a "vast stretch of coast, seen from an ever-rotating vantage point." For Rich, the beach symbolizes the "intimate landscape that is shared by women and men."[25]

It is through metaphor that a playwright can go beyond simply dramatizing specific events on stage and can dramatize that which is timeless and universal. In *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Wallace Shawn uses the "amoral escapades" of Mindy the prostitute to dramatize "the rot eating away at a supposedly civilized world."[26] Basuto Road, the South London slum in Michael Frayn's *Benefactors*, "eventually stands as a comic graveyard not merely for the vanished imperial West but also for the dashed hopes of the enlightened welfare state that replaced it." "Emblematic of the entire work" is the play's last image, when the architect who wanted to revitalize the slum hears a poor Basuto Road woman laughing but has no idea "what she was laughing about."[27] Sam Shepard "bleeds" the story of brothers Jake and Frankie into a "larger cultural mythos" in *A Lie of the Mind*:

> Once the author reaches his final curtain . . . our vision has widened beyond both brothers, their phantom father and Beth to take in a larger landscape. Mr. Shepard has illuminated those archetypal genetic fates

[25]Review of *Coastal Disturbances*, 20 November 1986, C25:1.

[26]Review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 29 October 1985, C13:1.

[27]Review of *Benefactors*, 23 December 1985, C11:1.

> we all share, finally to transcend them to find that urge for salvation, that hunger for love, that allows us, like Jake, to go on.[28]

This idea of myth goes hand-in-hand with metaphor. Here again is a way for an author to speak to that which is timeless. Rich criticized plays that missed the opportunity to "reimagine" events in the "transporting terms of myth,"[29] and praised those that seized that chance: *Jelly's Last Jam* is "an attempt to remake the Broadway musical in a mythic, African-American image";[30] in *Orphans*, "Reality festers verbally and visually until it boils over in the concentrated, mesmerizing form of hallucinatory myth";[31] and the "rending and hilarious reveries" of *A Lie of the Mind* are "bleeding into a mythic wilderness that has served writers from Harte, Twain and Cather to Welty, Didion and McMurtry."[32]

Not every attempt at far-reaching metaphor works, however, and not all earned Rich's praise. He criticized writers who superimpose metaphor that is not integral or relevant, and unmasked others who hope that the metaphor will be profound enough to throw a smokescreen over the play's other flaws. *Barnum*'s book writer, Mark Bramble, wants to use show business as "an all-purpose metaphor for the vagaries of life" but instead delivers an anemic book that has nothing profound to say.[33] The creators of *The Knife*, music by Nick Bicat and book by David Hare, forgo specific details that might be helpful in

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[28]Review of *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[29]Review of *Raggedy Ann*, 17 October 1986, C3:4.

[30]Review of *Jelly's Last Jam*, 27 April 1992, C11:1.

[31]Review of *Orphans*, 8 May 1985, C22:1.

[32]Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," II:5:1.

[33]Review of *Barnum*, 1 May 1980, C17:1.

making us know and care about the transsexual hero of the play and "indulge in remote highfalutin metaphors" of Freudian water imagery, colored patterns on windows, and dancing shadows, all uselessly fuzzy abstractions.[34] Fay Kanin, the book writer for *Grind*, sees her Chicago burlesque house setting as "a metaphor large enough to contain a compressed history of American racial conflicts." But Kanin delivers such undefined characters locked in melodramatic events that the audience cares neither about them nor the themes that they represent. The show, built on nothing but the metaphor, collapses.[35]

CHARACTER

Rich asked for writing that delves into characters and their emotions. Good writers create "people of such depth even if they may not be people you know or resemble people you know, you find something in them that speaks to you because it speaks to something that's eternal about human nature," said Rich. "And that's true of great writing not just in theatre but in novels and elsewhere."[36] He wanted writing that doesn't resort to plot gimmicks to propel the story and characters forward, but instead progresses by charting the growth and development of the characters. This, said Rich, is the "higher road." Most writers settle for less. In *Past Tense*, Jack Zeman "dances over the surface without plunging into the characters' depths" and "avoids drama" instead of creating it.[37] On the other hand, in *The Roads to Home*, Horton Foote makes his "characters' inner turmoil so ferociously vivid it leaps beyond their specific time

[34]Review of *The Knife*, 11 March 1987, C22:5.

[35]Review of *Grind*, 17 April 1985, C20:1.

[36]Rich, interview with the author.

[37]Review of *Past Tense*, 25 April 1980, C3:1.

and place to become our own."[38] Shirley Lauro, the author of *A Piece of My Heart*, pushes the audiences' buttons but obtains no lasting effect because she merely manipulates her characters from without rather than observing them from within.[39] When characters are not explored, they become mere observers of the play, as do the brothers in *Lost in Yonkers*.[40] Specificity of imagery "grounds" a character so he isn't simply the playwright's mouthpiece or "a symbolic vessel for the conveyance of abstract ideas."[41]

Characters must not be pinned down artificially, crammed into a box to fit a playwright's preconceived plot or theme. Rich respected authors who neither sentimentalize nor vilify their characters. Kate Jerome, the Jewish mother in *Broadway Bound*, is Neil Simon's "bravest and most profound creation." Earlier Simon heroines have been sentimentalized or caricatured, but Simon refuses to "sanctify or mock" Kate; she is "neither a clownish kvetch nor a sentimentalized martyr"; instead, Simon sees her "whole."[42] Tina Howe also lets things happen with her characters. Her men and women in *Coastal Disturbances* have passions that well up when least expected; they are "as changeable as New England summer weather and just as resistant to scientific prognostication." The characters, the entire play, is like the sky above it that "hasn't yet determined what's going to be."[43]

Rich often found that writers can create strong central characters but then

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[38]Review of *The Roads to Home*, 18 September 1992, C2:3.

[39]Review of *A Piece of My Heart*, 4 November 1991, C15:1.

[40]Review of *Lost in Yonkers*, 22 February 1991, C1:4.

[41]Review of *Krapp's Last Tape*, 5 September 1986, C3:1.

[42]Review of *Broadway Bound*, 5 December 1986, C3:1; and Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

[43]Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

they surround them with flat, stereotypical, mushmouthed supporting characters of the sitcom variety. This is another example of sloppy or lazy writing, of authors who want characters to spring from ideas rather than ideas from characters. Joseph Dougherty writes "tender and sophisticated" scenes for his two leads in *Digby* but his supporting characters "descend to the broad common denominator of prime time."[44]

The best writing deals with specifics, not generalities. Peter Hedges's *Imagining Brad* is faulty because the playwright "defends womanhood in the abstract without bothering to examine the men held culpable."[45] "Whatever insights might lurk in 'Highest Standard,' [Keith Reddin's disappointing follow-up to *Rum and Coke*] are lost in the over-generalizing."[46] Dealing with generalities leads to characters that aren't differentiated; lines could be swapped back and forth and no one would know or care, even characters could be swapped back and forth between plays. *Black Eagles* suffers from this fuzzy characterization.[47] *From the Mississippi Delta* tries to tell too many stories and thus evokes only fuzzy, generalized memories or emotions.[48] Even on universal issues, Rich wanted the author to deal with specifics. It is because *Mad Forest* deals with specifics that it is able to seep "beyond its specific events and setting to illuminate a broader nightmare of social collapse."[49] *'Night Mother* is not "an inflated, abstract argument about life vs. death, but an intimate eavesdropping

[44]Review of *Digby*, 20 March 1985, C17:1.

[45]Review of *Imagining Brad*, 7 February 1990, C15:2.

[46]Review of *Highest Standard*, 14 November 1986, C3:1.

[47]Review of *Black Eagles*, 22 April 1991, C13:1.

[48]Review of *From the Mississippi Delta*, 12 November 1991, C13:1.

[49]Review of *Mad Forest*, 5 December 1991, C15:3.

eavesdropping on two people" and this is why it is so affecting.[50] David Hare's *Fanshen* also deals with the large through the small; Hare takes "a microscopic view of one embryonic moment in history, so free of ideological pleading and so intimate that it could be a paradigm of almost any newborn society's struggle."[51]

POLEMICS

Rich disliked cliched, sanctimonious sloganeering and he criticized polemic, didactic writing as much as any other single flaw. He insisted on honesty of dialogue, not preaching. He praised *Crimes of the Heart* because its author, Beth Henley, "insists that the truth be told in the raucous, flowing language of fully-observed life, not the mawkish homilies of a moralizing playwright."[52] Theresa Rebeck's *Spike Heels* is mostly well-written, too; unfortunately, whenever Rebeck gets "stuck" she "takes to pounding in her points." If the writing were what it should be, Rich said, then the audience would get Rebeck's points without being lectured.[53]

This is true in political theatre, too. The best of this brand—*Fifth of July, A Lesson From Aloies, How I Got That Story*—is always subtle, said Rich.[54] *Botha*, a sincere but ineffective play about apartheid, shows that "wan agitprop drama can make even the most pressing and unassailable moral imperatives

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[50]Review of *'night Mother*, 12 January 1983, C15:4.

[51]Review of *Fanshen*, 3 February 1983, C20:1.

[52]Frank Rich, "High Points Were Off Broadway," *New York Times*, 31 May 1981, II:1:4.

[53]Review of *Spike Heels*, 5 June 1992, C3:1.

[54]Frank Rich, "In Political Theater, Soft Campaign Is Best," *New York Times*, 26 December 1980, C3:1.

sound as numbing as a politician's empty slogans."[55]

An author should say what he has to say theatrically as well as subtly. John Patrick Shanley's *Beggars in the House of Plenty* is basically a well-written play, but in the last act, Shanley "starts to address his questions preachily, shoving his undigested (and unexceptional) views about life on the audience instead of transforming them into theatre."[56] Preaching is often compounded by repetitiveness when an author has a "point" to make; his characters are often left simply rephrasing their positions again and again. Writers who readily assign blame, who paint in black and white only, who preach glib remedies, do themselves—and their points—more harm than good. When David Hare's *Secret Rapture*, which Rich had liked in London, opened in New York, the play's subtleties had been "flattened . . . into coarse agitprop." Conversely, in *Fanshen*, his play about the Chinese Revolution, Hare is tough; he makes no judgments, he makes the characters prove their points.[57] Tom Stoppard, too, refuses to "stack his characters' arguments" in *Artist Descending a Staircase*, and Philip Kan Gotanda, the author of *Yankee Dawg You Die*, is a "polemicist who sees both sides of a question, a writer whose grievances are balanced by a wicked sense of humor."[58] Wallace Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon* refuses to tell theatregoers what to think; the audience must marshal its own rebuttal to Lemon's articulate defense of the Nazis, and the result of this non-polemic, even counter-polemic tactic is to force that audience to question

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[55]Review of *Botha*, 19 September 1986, C3:4.

[56]Review of *Beggars in the House of Plenty*, 24 October 1991, C17:4.

[57]Reviews of *The Secret Rapture*, 27 October 1989, C3:1; and *Fanshen*, 3 February 1983, C20:1.

[58]Reviews of *Artist Descending a Staircase*, 1 December 1989, C3:1; and *Yankee Dawg You Die*, 15 May 1989, C13:4.

whether it could counter the "spurious polemics" of a real-life Lemon.[59] Shawn goes beyond subtlety in his dialogue and refuses even to provide any sympathetic characters for the audience to know who to side with and who to believe. This is the opposite of *Trinity Site*, a preachy antibomb melodrama that defeats its own purpose by "stacking the deck" and creating characters too good to be true. The audience neither empathizes with, nor cares about, these characters, and certainly will not listen to what they have to say for the playwright.[60] Even Sam Shepard occasionally forgets his own adage that ideas emerge from plays, plays don't emerge from ideas. In 1991's *States of Shock*, Shepard's first new play in several years, Rich said that the playwright doesn't lecture—he is too smart for that—but he does pile on "repetitive incantations and images that define the play's territory with didactic rigidity."[61]

If a play must not be polemical, still it must illuminate, rather than pay lip service to, its subject. Too many plays want credit simply because they are about certain issues, whether they have anything new to say or not. Ruthless self-examination by the author counts for much more than merely invoking a difficult subject. In a 1984 article, "To Make Serious Theater, 'Serious' Issues Aren't Enough," Rich said that there exists the fallacy that simply mentioning a social issue gives a play a claim to importance when in reality most of these have an open and shut simplicity that raises no real debate and succeeds only "in congratulating audiences on their own self-righteous piety."[62] *Dalton's Back*,

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[59]Review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 29 October 1985, C13:1.

[60]Review of *Trinity Site*, 17 June 1986, C13:5.

[61]Review of *States of Shock*, 17 May 1991, C1:3.

[62]Frank Rich, "To Make Serious Theater, 'Serious' Issues Aren't Enough," *New York Times*, 19 February 1984, II:1:1.

Back, Keith Curran's play about child abuse, has nothing new to say about the subject; it merely "accentuates the obvious."[63] *The Danube* "parade[s] serious issues across the stage" without illuminating them.[64] In plays that really qualify to be called "serious" theatre—*'night Mother*, some Mamet, much Shepard—the issues aren't plastered on top but "bubble to the surface" and force an audience to look at even larger issues with no spoon-fed answers.[65] Rich seemed especially incensed when a play tossed in issue after issue—as he put it, "lest any sociological stone go unturned"[66]—with little understanding or integrity. *A Baby Dance* touches on class conflict, racism, abortion, birth control, and the ethics of surrogate parenthood, but the author, Jane Anderson, has nothing to say about these issues; she simply "milks them for cheap melodrama."[67]

If a play must not be preachy, it also must not oversimplify. Rich wrote that 1989 was a year in which the "theater too often reduced the important to the trivial."[68] Rich was harder on such plays that take a sensitive subject and treat it inappropriately than on plays that have no grand ambitions to begin with. *Before the Dawn* "reduces a shattering historical cataclysm [the massacre of 100,000 Kiev citizens at Babi Yar] to a nearly lifeless domestic melodrama."[69] In *A Piece of My Heart*, Shirley Lauro oversimplifies, trivializes, or at best

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[63]Review of *Dalton's Back*, 10 February 1989, C3:1.

[64]Review of *The Danube*, 13 March 1984, C13:1.

[65]Rich, "To Make Serious Theater," II:1:1.

[66]Review of *The Hands of the Enemy*, 19 November 1986, C29:1.

[67]Review of *A Baby Dance*, 18 October 1991, C5:1.

[68]Frank Rich, "Personal Voices Made Plays Worth Watching," *New York Times*, 24 December 1989, II:3:1.

[69]Review of *Before the Dawn*, 25 March 1985, C15:1.

sidesteps the racial and ideological conflicts that she had met head-on in her play *Open Admissions*,[70] and James Duff's *Home Front* "so trivializes the Vietnam era that everyone might just as well be arguing over the car keys."[71] For every inspired work on a subject, Rich wrote in his review of *Trinity Site*, an antibomb melodrama, "there are many trivializing works that don't contemplate the unthinkable so much as connive to exploit it for maudlin effect" and offer a treatment of the issues that is "intellectually impoverished."[72]

Rich also derided writers who use plays to proclaim vociferously unnecessary or warmed over truths that no one would dream of objecting to in the first place. He sometimes wrote that the "message" that finally emerges from a play doesn't seem worth the effort it took either to write the play or to sit through it. Either the author is debunking something that already has been debunked to death—and in more entertaining or enlightening ways, is advocating something that is patently unobjectionable, or is crying out against some horror such as child abuse that no sane person could help but abhor.

"TOTAL" THEATRE

To Rich, good writing meant more than simply good dialogue. "To me," he said, "good theater is theater that involves the mind, the senses, and the feelings."[73] Those works are best that could not be done in any other media but have a genuine theatricality, a "total sense of theater" about them. He said that if he saw anything in common among the playwrights that he most admired—a

[70]Review of *A Piece of My Heart*, 4 November 1991, C15:1.

[71]Review of *Home Front*, 3 January 1985, C13:1.

[72]Review of *Trinity Site*, 17 June 1986, C13:5.

[73]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 21.

Sam Shepard, a Lanford Wilson, a John Guare—it was that all are what he called "real theatre writers," even if they sometimes work in other media.[74] He wrote: "Like *A Lie of the Mind*, the other superior plays of 1985 made the case that there is nothing quite like the theater. . . . To miss the best stage offerings this year was to miss art unavailable in any other form anywhere else." These plays stand out as "indigenously theatrical creations."[75]

A Lie of the Mind, like most Shepard plays, creates "a cumulative dramatic sensation" not dependent upon the words alone; it is a play to which the standard theatre vocabulary cannot be applied.[76] *The Grapes of Wrath* uses curtains of rain, a violent duel of flashlights, a rotating truck, campfires, shadows, and the music of a migrant band to create striking sounds and images. "What one finds in place of conventional dramatic elements . . .," Rich wrote, "is pure theater. . . ."[77] *Vienna: Lusthaus*, a voluptuous mixture of movement, music and images, is so innovative in its pure theatricality that it points the way to "future directions for the musical theater."[78] In his review of *Les Atrides*, Rich contrasted the flat lengthy passages of discourse and "static recitations of the text" in *The Eumenides* with the coup de théâtre and "fierce dramatic images" of *The Libation Bearers*.[79] He praised John Guares's "willingness to free associate in language, theatrical style and content" in *Moon*

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[74]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[75]Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," II:5:1.

[76]*Ibid.*; and Review of *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[77]Review of *The Grapes of Wrath*, 23 March 1990, C1:4.

[78]Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

[79]Review of *Les Atrides*, 6 October 1992, C11:3.

Over Miami instead of simply turning out a well-made play.[80] *Asinamalil*, a South African play about men victimized by racist laws and daily humiliation, is "full-throttle theater" that "eschews realism for a tightly choreographed melding of indigenous ritual, storytelling and musical theater."[81] Tadeusz Kantor's *Let the Artists Die* foregoes traditional theatrical conventions in favor of replaying "a stylized, gestural pageant of horrors over and over." This type of theatre is not easily sidestepped or forgotten; it sinks in and leaves the audience feeling "possessed by a nightmare."[82] It is this ability of "total theatre" to speak at a level so deep the "spirit responds before [the] mind" that was central to Rich's vision of theatre's purpose.[83] Although *Dancing at Lughnasa* reveals the command of language that one has come to expect from Irish dramatists, the play's real poetry, its real magic, its "dream music" is not about mere language; this is "theater at its fullest" and, as such, the play "strikes deep chords that words cannot begin to touch." This total theatre, best symbolized by the spontaneous, uninhibited dance that possesses the sisters, "yank[s] the audience into communion with its own most private and sacred things, at a pre-intellectual gut level that leaves us full of personal feelings to which words can not be readily assigned." *Dancing at Lughnasa* grabs the audience as it does by "expressing the verbally inexpressible in gesture and music." Here, wrote Rich, is a play that "does exactly what theater was born to do."[84]

It is not a giant step from this love of "total" theatre to reservations about

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[80]Review of *Moon Over Miami*, 24 February 1989, C3:1.

[81]Review of *Asinamalil*, 12 September 1986, C3:4.

[82]Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," II:5:1.

[83]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 39.

[84]Review of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 26 October 1991, C1:4.

the naturalistic play. Rich felt that this form had been usurped by film and television and that only the outstanding playwright could hope to compete with those.[85] Theatre affects audiences more, said Rich, when it is non-naturalistic. He did not, however, want non-naturalism to become a new religion suppressing naturalism out of existence. Although Rich certainly wrote favorably about many naturalistic plays, at times he seemed to consider them an inferior form, one that the best writers will outgrow. In his review of *The Substance of Fire*, Rich wrote that "[Jon Robin] Baitz seems to understand so much—about people, language, society—and to be so eager to say what he knows that the naturalistic conventions of a work like 'The Substance of Fire' simply cannot contain them."[86] In his assessment of the best plays of the 1987-88 season, Rich said, "Observant of the real world as they can be, the season's other notable plays also lift us to a plane of experience that leaves journalistic or cinematic realism behind."[87] *Mad Forest*, created almost as a research project by Caryl Churchill and her group of performers, might have been a tedious accumulation of facts had Churchill settled for a naturalistic, documentary style, but by opting for a surreal, oblique approach, she is able to illuminate both Ceausescu's Rumania and "a broader nightmare of social collapse."[88] *Aunt Dan and Lemon* sears its way into audiences' consciences because Wallace Shawn has tossed aside many of the "crutches" of realism, including "ideological or moral closure."[89]

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[85]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[86]Review of *The Substance of Fire*, 18 March 1991, C11:1.

[87]Rich, "A Vintage Year in the Theater," II:1:1.

[88]Review of *Mad Forest*, 5 December 1991, C15:3.

[89]Review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 28 March 1986, C3:4.

DARING

Rich's survey pieces regularly bemoaned the lack of "risky productions" of new, unproven work on Broadway. His detractors scoffed at this, saying that it was Rich himself who was largely responsible for the absence of those kinds of shows. In return, Rich said that blaming him is an easy way of dismissing a host of problems, especially rising production costs. We will look at that argument in Chapter Four, but for now, we can say that Rich did at least champion his own version of "daring" productions. These he found among the plays and musicals of a Shepard, a Sondheim, a Mamet, writers whose works frequently are misunderstood and sometimes fail, but who never can be accused of timidity. Rich, almost alone among critics, admired Jules Feiffer's *Grown Ups*, which he called "the most daring American play to appear on Broadway in several seasons." *Grown Ups* refuses to "follow conventions of the well-made play," said Rich, and "has more in common with avant-garde theater of Europe."[90] George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* and Eric Bogosian's *Drinking in America* were cited for "daring theater minds at work."[91] Of *Jelly's Last Jam*, he wrote, "You go to intermission with the sensation something new and exciting is happening."[92] Conversely, David Hirson's *La Bete*, a play written in verse, begins in a daring fashion but it loses its edginess after the first half hour and does not fulfill the expectations that it has created.[93] *The Good Times Are*

[90]Frank Rich, "Much to Bemoan, but Lots to Praise," *New York Times*, 27 December 1981, II:6:5.

[91]Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

[92]Review of *Jelly's Last Jam*, 27 April 1992, C11:1.

[93]Review of *La Bete*, 11 February 1991, C11:3.

Killing Me also was faulted for turning conventional after opening in daring, "free form" style.[94] Writers must take audiences, said Rich, "to places where only brave artists dare to go."[95]

VOICE

Poetry, metaphor, myth, subtlety, a sense of total theatre, finding drama in the spaces—sometimes these come together in such a way as to give a writer what Rich called a "voice." This was his highest accolade and was the one quality that would allow him to overlook the mistakes of a young writer and to place an established writer into the top echelon.

Rich wrote:

> Because I believe that an honest, personal voice is what can make a writer worth listening to . . . the plays of 1989 that stay with me are those in which the voice is strong even when the craft is too frequently sloppy or lacking. Though these plays sometimes don't "work" . . . they have emotional or intellectual staying power.[96]

The idea of a voice manifests itself in many ways. Often it has to do with the author's ability to dramatize the unspoken stories, to effect an audience's intellect and emotions as much by what they do not see and the characters do not say as by what is seen and said. Thom Thomas, despite a reliance on melodramatic devices, shows a fresh voice in *The Interview*, as does Keith Reddin in *Life and Limb*.[97] Scott McPherson, the late author of *Marvin's Room*, had a voice that was original and unexpected and, most important, it was sure

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[94]Review of *The Good Times Are Killing Me*, 19 April 1991, C3:1.

[95]Rich, "A Vintage Year in the Theater," II:1:1.

[96]Rich, "Personal Voices Made Plays Worth Watching," II:3:1.

[97]Reviews of *The Interview*, 24 April 1980, C20:5; and *Life and Limb*, 25 January 1985, C3:1.

of its own idiosyncratic tone.[98] It is his voice that makes Sam Shepard perhaps the preeminent playwright for Rich. Shepard writes in a way that is valid and peculiar to him. Voice does not submit to "immaculate intellectual formulas" being imposed on it and often can't be explained or accounted for using standard theatrical terms.[99] Above all, voice gives a play an afterlife; that is, a playwright with a voice—Shepard is the best example—usually continues speaking even after the final curtain has dropped. This "voice" of certain playwrights simply cannot be shut out.

UNCONVENTIONAL WORKS

When Rich talked about daring plays, he was usually referring to an author's handling of themes, to a work that has something new to say, that brings new subject matter onto the stage. His critics, however, wanted something more from him in the areas of experimental theatre and performance art. He said that the criticism he took was not warranted, in part because performance art gained prominence only during the last years of his tenure and so much of it was outside his purview. He reviewed it intermittently and said, "Some of it I liked and some I thought was faddish and I had no use for it."[100]

Rich said that he was an advocate of new, unfamiliar work; that advocacy is, in fact, a function of criticism. He said that part of the critic's job is to encourage new ideas, to call attention to new writers, and to help explain how audiences should look at work that is unfamiliar:

> I think there's a built-in advocacy function to criticism. There are many things I'm very enthusiastic about that I feel may strike people as off-beat,

[98]Review of *Marvin's Room*, 6 December 1991, C1:5.

[99]Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," II:5:1.

[100]Rich, interview with the author.

> because the work is trying to do something differently. Then it's a matter of not simply saying, "You must go see this," but of trying to be a handmaiden—explaining how to look at something. The advocacy function involves spreading your excitement of discovery.[101]

Rich said that the hardest part of reviewing avant-garde work is finding a vocabulary to use to discuss a piece that is new to the reviewer's experience or at least is likely to be new to his readers' experience:

> To talk about a piece like *Vienna: Lusthaus*, you have to come up with another way of doing it to try to get people interested, particularly if you like it, because there is no plot to fall back on and there is no dialogue to quote. And, except for with people who follow that kind of dance theatre, there are no antecedents really. It is a challenge. One of the most interesting reviews Atkinson ever wrote—I think it was *Godot*. He was very moved by *Godot*, but he didn't know how to explain it. He said something like, "I don't know exactly what it was and can't describe it to you but it affected me, and go see it." Critics always have to wrestle with some works to have the right vocabulary.[102]

If Rich wanted to dismiss experimental work of artists from here or abroad, it would have been a simple task. As chief drama critic, his main province was Broadway. Although the limited number of new shows there allowed him time to see much off-Broadway, he could, if he chose, limit that, and could choose to never set foot in any more out-of-the-way places. When Rich wanted to, he could convey a sense of excitement about an unusual performance piece. Often, he didn't want to; he was more often seen as indifferent to or dismissive of the unconventional than as openly hostile,

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[101]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[102]Rich, interview with the author. Atkinson called *Waiting for Godot* "a mystery wrapped in an enigma." It has a strange power, he said, and is puzzling and convincing at the same time. "Theatregoers can rail at it, but they cannot ignore it. For Mr. Beckett is a valid writer." Brooks Atkinson, Review of *Waiting for Godot*, *New York Times*, 10 April 1956, 21:2.

accused as much of sins of omission as of commission.[103]

A list of important unconventional and/or international works that Rich did not review includes: all the plays in the 1991 New York International Festival of the Arts, including Tadeusz Kantor's *The Dead Class*, Tadashi Suzuki's *Dionysus*, and Ingmar Bergman's *Miss Julie, Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *A Doll's House*; Bergman's *Peer Gynt* and *Madame de Sade* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music; Robert Wilson, Tom Waits, and William Burroughs's *The Black Rider*; BAM's 1984 revival of *Einstein on the Beach*, which marked Robert Wilson's return to the United States after eight years of working mostly in Europe; Wilson's *CIVIL warS: The Knee Plays* and his *Dr. Faustus Lights the Lights*, both at Lincoln Center; Tadeuz Kantor's *Wielopole Wielopole*; Ping Chong's *Elephant Memories, Nuit Blanche, A.M./A.M.-The Articulated Man, Nosferatu*, and *Anna Into Nightlight*, the Grand Kabuki's two-week run at the Met in 1982; the Kanze Noh Theater's performances at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Soviet Rustaveli Theater Company's *King Lear* at BAM; Mbongeni Ngema's *Township Fever*, also at BAM; Bernard-Marie Koltès *Come Dog, Come Night*; Tadashi Suzuki's *The Bacchae*; any of La Mama's twentieth-anniversary season performances; Peter Brook's *L'Os, Ubu Roi, The Ik*, and *The Conference of the Birds*; Joseph Chaikin's *Tourists and Refugees*; Richard Foreman's *The Mind King, Film Is Evil, Radio Is Good, Symphony of Rats*, and *The Golem* at the Delacourte; the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.* and *Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act)*; Theodora Skipitares's *Defenders of the Code*, John Kelly's *Pass the Blutwurst, Bitte, Ode to a Cube*, and *Find My Way*

[103]Among the writers who saw Rich and his legacy as either hostile or, at best, indifferent to the avant-garde and international works are Charles Marowitz, Robert Brustein, Chip Brown, Todd London, Erica Munk, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ross Wetzsteon. See Marowitz, "A Rebuttal," 28-29; Brustein, "An Embarrassment of Riches," 28; Brown, 176; London; Munk, 67; Geoffrey Stokes, "The Secret Rupture," *Village Voice*, 28 November 1989, 38; and Ross Wetzsteon, "Sunday in the *Times* With Frank," *Village Voice*, 22 February 1994, 89.

Home; and Mabou Mines' *Cold Harbor.*

The choices that Rich made also seem indicative: Rather than review the Ninagawa *Macbeth* at BAM, he reviewed Circle Rep's *The Colorado Catechism*, about recovering alcoholics; instead of Compaigne Phillippe Genty's *Aaah Oui Genty* at the Bijou, he saw *March of the Falsettos* at Playwrights Horizons; and he went to the Long Wharf to review Eduardo Machado's *Once Removed* rather than JoAnne Akalaitis's *Woyzeck* at the Public. He did not travel to Cambridge to review the first part of Robert Wilson's *CIVIL warS*, the first time a major portion of the work was staged in this country (John Rockwell did), or Wilson's *When We Dead Awaken*, also at Cambridge (Mel Gussow did), or Andrzej Wajda's *Crime and Punishment* at S.U.N.Y. Purchase (Gussow did).

Rich did not like Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata* (most critics raved about it), and considered most of Martha Clarke's work, except *Vienna: Lusthaus*, disappointing. *Endangered Species, The Hunger Artist*, and *Miracolo d'Amore* were long on showmanship but short on insight and substance. Mabou Mines' reverse gender *Lear* was tedious, with poor performances and sophomoric jokes, and it was not thought through by director Lee Breuer. Rich also disliked Breuer's *The Gospel of Colonus*, *The Warrior Ant*, and *Prelude to Death in Venice.* Richard Foreman's concept was at war with the text in his *Don Juan* at the Public, and Foreman's *What Did He See?* though it had its moments, "sounds like an undergraduate class discussion in Philosophy 101."[104] He disliked the Wooster Group's *North Atlantic*, JoAnne Akalaitis's version of Genet's *The Balcony*, and Robert Wilson's *Dialog/Curious George* and his *Overture to the Fourth Act of Deafman Glance*

[104] Review of *What Did He See?*, 19 October 1988, C19:1.

("desultory," no profound emotional range), both at Lincoln Center. He wrote of the Zagreb Theater company's *The Liberation of Skopje*:

> Though this production caused a sensation in other stops on its American tour. . . both the writing and the performance seem to lack subtlety. . . . Once the novelty wears off, the evening also disappoints as pure spectacle.[105]

These lists offer only a fragment of the works that Rich did not review or did not like. Many of these works were indeed outside the normal purview of the *Times*'s chief drama critic. But when a critic goes out of his way to champion and sanction certain plays and artists, declining to do that for other kinds of works can lead, legitimately or not, to being labeled "dismissive."

One artist and group that Rich praised consistently is Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Rich liked almost everything the group did, including *The Artificial Jungle, Exquisite Torture, Reverse Psychology, Brother Truckers*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Looking at *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, Rich said that Ludlam "has stubbornly pursued an idiosyncratic artistic vision for nearly 20 years—now to arrive at a new creative peak."[106] In more than one review of the company after Ludlam's death, Rich wrote touchingly of Ludlam's vision. Rich also raved about, among others, Peter Brook's *Carmen* and *The Cherry Orchard*, Foreman's *Penguin Touquet*, the Wooster Group's *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith*, Clarke's *Vienna: Lusthaus*, and *Born in the R.S.A.* and *Asinamali!* from the 1986 South African Theater Festival.

Rich's critics would say that those reviews were exceptions and that a better example of his handling, and understanding, of experimental theatre came through in his review of what he called Squat's "weird" and "static" *Three*

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[105]Review of *The Liberation of Skopje*, 21 September 1982, C15:4.

[106]Rich, "The Best May Be a Harbinger of Brighter Days," II:3:1.

Sisters. Unlike his best reviews, in which Rich analyzed a play with great insight, in this review he hazarded a few guesses as to what was going on, belittled all those possibilities, and settled for saying, in essence (and I paraphrase), "I don't know what this is saying but, regardless, it's doing no one any good anyway."[107]

Ultimately, Rich came across not so much as an enemy of the avant-garde as skeptical of it, declining to become more than a largely uninterested, unmoved bystander. To the form's practitioners, it seemed much the same thing.

MUSICALS

Rich demanded of musicals the same qualities that have made musicals work since *Oklahoma*, a "fusion of drama, music, character, design and movement."[108] What he didn't want, though, is a rehashing of *Oklahoma* or of any other musical. One of the most common and best compliments that Rich could give a revival was that the songs, the dances, even the orchestrations seem "freshly minted." The Goodspeed Opera's revival of *The Most Happy Fella* is "a serious rethinking of the musical rather than a museum restoration of it. . . ."[109] *And the World Goes Round: The Songs of Kander and Ebb* has that freshly minted sound and look.[110] *City of Angels*, though not a revival, finds a

[107]Review of *The Three Sisters*, 31 October 1980, C3:1.

[108]Review of *Les Misérables*, 13 May 1987, C1:1.

[109]Review of *The Most Happy Fella*, 30 May 1991, C13:1.

[110]Review of *And the World Goes Round: the Songs of Kander and Ebb*, 19 March 1991, C11:2.

"fresh way to parody tough-guy films."[111] *Meet Me in St. Louis*, on the other hand, has nothing fresh about it; it is a piling up of formula and devices in an effort to reconstruct a Broadway hit.[112]

Rich wanted a musical, including the songs, to do more than tell a story; he wanted that story dramatized. In *Grand Hotel*, the song about the liberation of the dying clerk Otto is effective because the song and the choreography dramatize the character dynamically.[113] Rich didn't like labored lyrics and would point out amateurish and predictable rhymes. He also wanted the lyrics to be more than mere platitudes, a fault he found in William Finn's *Romance in Hard Times*.[114] In fact, where possible, Rich's criteria for a musical were similar to those for a play. Sondheim is good because he is elliptical, there remains "tension between his meaning and his expression of that meaning."[115] On the other hand, *Brownstone* lacks dramatic action and compelling characters and is more song recital than show.[116] *Aspects of Love* was faulted for its lack of humanity.[117] *Raggedy Ann* has a score and lyrics that are "so generic that they could have been written for any mediocre musical, not just this specific one."[118] When *Grind* belatedly gets around to making its point, it turns didactic and the

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[111]Review of *City of Angels*, 12 December 1989, C19:4.

[112]Review of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 3 November 1989, C3:1.

[113]Review of *Grand Hotel*, 13 November 1989, C13:3.

[114]Review of *Romance in Hard Times*, 29 December 1989, C3:1.

[115]Frank Rich, "Sondheim's Winding Paths, " *New York Times*, 29 November 1987, II:1:3.

[116]Review of *Brownstone*, 7 November 1986, C3:4.

[117]Review of *Aspects of Love*, 9 April 1990, C11:1.

[118]Review of *Raggedy Ann*, 17 October 1986, C3:4.

message is tired and gratuitous anyway.[119] The characters in *Hang on to the Good Times* are too saccharine for the audience to care about or identify with.[120] Rich liked innovation in musicals, if anything, more than in plays. The creators of *3 Guys Naked From the Waist Down* are "bursting with daring ideas about how to do musicals even when the musical they've actually done settles for the banal."[121] *Jelly's Last Jam, Dreamgirls, Sunday in the Park With George*—all are daring new ways of doing musicals that repeatedly earned Rich's praise.

Rich's theatre knowledge showed more in his reviews of musicals than anywhere else. These reviews were crammed with references to other musicals and to other work by the creators. He pointed out where a song had been cut, where a lyric had been changed, where a moment in one musical had been the genesis of another. But he was knowledgeable about technical and practical, as well as historical, matters. He noticed when dancing was fudged, when orchestrations were tinny or unsuitable for the theatre, when the pit band was shy a needed instrument or the location has the sound muffled, when percussion-heavy orchestrations led to a repetitious sound, when amplification was harsh and scratchy, when melodies were derivative, when musical numbers or styles were arbitrary, when a composer relied on running lyrical conceits, when the chorus was too thin for its purposes, when voices were weak, straining, or unsuited for the material, when a singer missed the point of a song, when the arrangements were perfunctory or when they don't suit the music and lyrics, when the choreography was repetitive and unimaginative, when a score is monotonous and insistent or skimpy, when numbers were

[119]Review of *Grind*, 17 April 1985, C20:1.

[120]Review of *Hang on to the Good Times*, 19 February 1985, C18:4.

[121]Review of *3 Guys Naked From the Waist Down*, 6 February 1985, C17:1.

inserted irrelevantly and arbitrarily, and when a chintzy budget marred the production's look and sound.

CLASSICS

Rich was conventional with regard to the classics. He took the company line, pointing out the recognized virtues of recent and past dramatists from Beckett to Shakespeare in something of an offhand academic fashion, as if in a graduate class of readers, all of whom knew the standard line. Rich rarely disparaged one of the great writers of the past or sought to take him out of his place, but neither did he generate much enthusiasm for the writer or the play. There was a feeling that came through in his writing (or, perhaps better put, a feeling that didn't come through) that left him seeming indifferent. He did not create a sense of urgency and excitement about the classics the way he sometimes would about a new play or playwright. This was partly because Rich was most concerned with encouraging new writers and partly because of his journalistic background; as he said in "Exit the Critic," he loved to see something new and exciting and to have the thrill of "breaking the story" to his readers.[122] Shakespeare might be dealing with universal concerns in particular settings, he might be delving into character's emotions, he might be exciting, but others have made these points so often that doing so held less appeal for Rich.

As would be expected, Rich's focus with the classics was on production, not text. His greatest emphasis was usually on the director's vision and how it was carried out, and his second concern was with acting. Even "exemplary acting" and "imaginative staging" are not enough; they must go hand-in-hand with a freshness and vitality. As he once wrote in a report from London, in the

[122]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 39.

best productions of the classics, "the plays are treated as if they'd just been yanked out of a living writer's typewriter."[123] We will look more closely at Rich's reviews of the classics when we look at directing.

LINKING

Rich liked best those plays that make connections with the world outside the theatre. Because his tenure coincided with upheavals in the world and theatre—including the collapse of the Soviet-bloc governments and the advent of the AIDS epidemic—he saw an enormous number of plays that reached beyond the walls of the theatre to make connections with the world we live in. Rich's insistence on these links, made by the authors or by himself, was, in part, his way of making the theatre more important, of saying that what the theatre is dealing with is not trivial, but current, valuable, heady stuff. This may well be the most distinctive aspect of Rich's style. This linking came on two levels: First, theatre was linked directly to current events, to important issues; second, those links were still made, but they transcended the present to make important, lasting statements about the timeless, the universal.

In a June 1986 article titled "At Its Best, The Theater Illuminated Our World," Rich wrote: "Our stage. . . must have poetry that makes us re-examine the world we inhabit and our place within it." Some artists and plays—*Benefactors, The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe, Drinking in America, House of Blue Leaves, Loot, Let the Artists Die, Vienna: Lusthaus, Aunt Dan and Lemon*—do indeed illuminate "that increasingly dangerous environment beyond the playhouse with a penetrating and

[123]Frank Rich, "London Theater Leads a Double Life," *New York Times*, 5 August 1984, II:1:1.

therapeutic, if not necessarily reassuring, brilliance."[124] Three and a half years later, in his year-end wrap-up, Rich criticized the New York theatre because "at a time when the world was moving forward, the New York theater didn't harness itself to history. . . . " In that same article, he wrote, "one imagines—and hopes—that there will be much more disruptive theatre to argue about now that the 1990s, riding on the winds of previously unimaginable change, are at long last here."[125] The following year, Rich's year-end article dealt not only with links that the theatre made to the real world, but also with the real-life dramas revolving around the plays. The dispute over Jonathan Price keeping the role of the Engineer in the Broadway production of *Miss Saigon* was a "catalyst for the release of racial tensions that had been building up for some time and were bound to explode sooner or later in the theatre industry, with or without 'Miss Saigon.' " With its closing, the acclaimed production of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a tale of a "distant depression," became "a symbolic victim of a new economic tailspin, adding its own large company . . . to the ranks of the unemployed and leaving another darkened midtown marquee to serve as a makeshift shelter for New York's destitute. Where did art end and real life begin?" Rich ended the article by saying that "the prognosis for the theater, like that for the world the stage inevitably reflects, is less clear."[126]

Time and again we see Rich praise artists and plays that look beyond the darkened confines of the theatre to the world. He wrote of Eric Bogosian's *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*: "At this remarkable historical moment people all over

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[124]Rich, "At Its Best, the Theater Illuminated Our World," II:1:.3.

[125]Rich, "Personal Voices Made Plays Worth Watching," II:3:1.

[126]Frank Rich, "Reality Intruded In a Paradoxical Year," *New York Times*, 30 December 1990, II:5:1.

the world are being thrown out of their cages, and among American writers for the theater, Mr. Bogosian is the first to see his own society as part of the big picture."[127] In Lilly Tomlin's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Live in the Universe*, a play that could have been taken as an extraordinary comedienne's lighthearted romp through the past decade, the audience instead is "treated to a trenchant view of social history."[128] In *Gypsy*, Rose and her children are driven to perform in order to be noticed, perhaps even loved. This touches chords about the audience's own needs, and a musical about the small world of show business "makes its red-hot connection with the real world beyond."[129] *A Tale of Two Cities* is the first play not written by Charles Ludlam that the Ridiculous Theatrical Company had done since Ludlam's death, prompting Rich to note the real-life drama "arching inevitable over the entire enterprise." "The audience," wrote Rich, "recognizes that it is witnessing a serious act of self-revelation that makes intriguing connections between role-playing in the theatre and elsewhere."[130]

Though the great plays often make their connections with society, they cannot be confined to their particular time period, their particular slice of the world or else, once that period is gone, they have nothing left to say. The best writing always "speaks to something that's eternal about human nature." "Tennessee Williams could not have written *Streetcar* anytime except the 1940s," said Rich, "yet even though it tells us something about the 1940s it tells

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[127]Review of *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*, 9 February 1990, C3:1.

[128]Review of *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Live in the Universe*, 27 September 1985, C3:1.

[129]Review of *Gypsy*, 17 November 1989, C5:1.

[130]Review of *A Tale of Two Cities*, 18 January 1989, C15:4.

us something about the 1990s, too. And if *Six Degrees of Separation* holds up, it will hold up long after the kind of East Side milieu . . . bamboozled by this flimflam man is gone."[131]

Macbeth could have been a "valuable" play to open the 1990s for the New York Shakespeare Festival, with an audience still retaining images of the lifeless body of Nicolae Ceausescu and the image of him and his wife before a military tribunal, but the production failed to make connections either with current events or with the timeless account of evil. This is, instead, a passionless, bloodless version that renders itself "irrelevant." "Shakespeare wrote so that audiences might recognize and maybe understand the pathology of evil," wrote Rich. But this production, with its near-happy ending, leads the audience to forget the horrors of the Macbeths, as well as of the Ceausescus, the Peróns, the Marcoses. "Surely the wistful point of retelling *Macbeth* —and revisiting the timeless, tragic history it evokes—is that one should never forget."[132]

Amadeus confines itself neither to the eighteenth century nor to the twentieth. It is not simply a play about two men and their rivalry; it is about a man—Salieri—at war with a more worthy antagonist—God:

> The wicked plot of "Amadeus" is merely a means for the playwright to present his view of the world. . . . If Mr. Shaffer shatters the audience's idealized illusions about his title character, he then goes on to smash our romantic illusions about ourselves. . . . "Amadeus" may be a play inspired by music and death, but it fills the theater with that mocking, heavenly silence that is the overwhelming terror of life.[133]

Angels in America makes its own metaphorical connections to the real

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[131]Rich, interview with the author.

[132]Review of *Macbeth*, 17 January 1990, C13:4.

[133]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

world. Prior is "the ideal heroic vessel for Mr. Kushner's unifying historical analogy, in which the modern march of gay people out of the closet is likened to the courageous migrations of turn-of-the-century Jews to America and of 19th-century Mormons across the plains."[134] *Six Degrees of Separation* makes direct, unmistakable connections to the world immediately beyond the walls of the theatre, but its representation of a certain slice of New York is not what catapulted it into the special position that it held with Rich. "What is really at stake in 'Six Degrees,' " he wrote of this favorite play, "is humanity itself, which must regain the harmonious composition and spiritual self-awareness that inspired high culture in the first place." He ended his review by saying: "This play invades an audience's soul by forcing it to confront the same urgent question asked of its New Yorkers: If we didn't come here to be this, then who do we intend to be."[135]

There is an almost unending list of examples to draw from. In *Aristocrats*, "[Brian] Friel makes the Irish condition synonymous with the human one."[136] Tadeusz Kantor and his Cricot 2 troupe bring alive a "patch of history" in *Let the Artists Die*, and his nightmarish sights and sounds replayed again and again uncover "our charnel-house terrors in his, tapping into the collective unconscious of the 20th century."[137] Rich's review of *Artist Descending a Staircase* linked the plot to larger themes about art and how people see the world.[138] The piercing alarm clock we hear going off in *Blood Knot* is "sounding

[134]Review of *Angels in America*, 10 November 1992, C15:3.

[135]Rich, "Guidebook to the Soul of a City," 1 July 1990, II:1:1.

[136]Review of *Aristocrats*, 26 April 1989, C15:1.

[137]Rich, "Once Again, Theater Was a Place for Wonder," II:5:1.

[138]Review of *Artist Descending a Staircase*, 1 December 1989, C3:1.

an alarm far beyond the walls of the shabby setting"; it is "history's alarm, warning of a time bomb soon to go off."[139] Michael Frayn's many-leveled *Benefactors* is not simply a domestic drama nor a problem play on the subject of urban planning; instead, "this prismatic work circumscribes the disillusionment of an era, no less American than English, in which grandiose dreams of a universally benevolent democracy died."[140] Of *Miracolo d'Amore*, he wrote: "Watching 'Miracolo d'Amore' one admires Martha Clarke's esthetic originality, but the real miracle cannot come until her novel stagecraft intersects with an equally fresh slant on the world beyond the theater's walls."[141]

Another reason Rich liked this idea of making connections with the world, in plays and in his reviews, is because it is a way of bringing about audience recognition. The best plays, he wrote, force people "onstage and by emphatic extension in the audience, to question their most cherished illusions about themselves and confront who they really are."[142] In the Athol Fugard plays *Blood Knot* and *'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys*, "the instant in which hatred, anger and brutality congeal into violence could make even the most enlightened theatergoer squirm with the horror of grotesque self-recognition."[143] *Aunt Dan and Lemon* is most shocking, most affecting, most unsettling because it causes the audience to question its own ability to counter the arguments of a real-life fascist like Lemon and, in the end, it has "succeeded in unlocking the

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[139]Review of *Blood Knot*, 11 December 1985, C23:1.

[140]Review of *Benefactors*, 23 December 1985, C11:1.

[141]Review of *Miracolo d'Amore*, 30 June 1988, C17:3.

[142]Rich, "A Vintage Year in the Theater," II:1:1.

[143]Review of *Blood Knot*, 11 December 1985, C23:1.

beasts within ourselves."[144] *Krapp's Last Tape* is searing theatre primarily because it causes the audience to consider its "own relationship to the 'extraordinary silence' of an indifferent universe."[145] As Hickey "waltzes dementedly about" at the end of *The Iceman Cometh*, "we look into rows of shuddering eyes that, like ours, have seen O'Neill smash through the bedrock of life's lies to expose the bottomless beckoning pit underneath."[146] Contemplating how Gallimard could be duped for 20 years by his M. Butterfly "lures us into contemplating larger questions—the eternal roles of men and women, of West and East."[147] Anna Christie's rage "shames and humbles Anna's men and the audience alike into examining what cruelties they have committed under the veil of decency."[148] David Hare's *Plenty* reaches "beyond its specific milieu to puncture our conscience" forcing us to examine "just how we choose to live in our own world of plenty right now."[149] As mentioned earlier, part of the failure of the Public's *Macbeth* is that it does not force the audience to remember and re-examine the horrors of tyrannical rule. *Before the Dawn*, a play about the massacre of Kiev Jews, is so remote, so mechanical that it fails to capture the pathos and does nothing to resurrect the tragedy for its audience.[150]

Rich sometimes extracted from a play connections—both to today's headlines and to timeless truths—that might have surprised the playwright as

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[144]Review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 29 October 1985, C13:1.

[145]Review of *Krapp's Last Tape*, 5 September 1986, C3:1.

[146]Review of *The Iceman Cometh*, 30 September 1985, C11:1.

[147]Rich, "A Vintage Year in the Theater," II:1:1.

[148]Review of *Anna Christie*, 15 January 1993, C1:1.

[149]Review of *Plenty*, 22 October 1982, C3:1.

[150]Review of *Before the Dawn*, 25 March 1985, C15:1.

much as anyone else. He didn't shy away from this:

> All you can do is go on your own best instincts about what you think something means. The authors of contemporary works are often deliberately misleading anyway if asked point blank . . . what their work is about. They're not necessarily going to tell the real answers because a lot of authors like to operate in secret and remain somewhat hidden from the audience and let the work speak for itself. I think part of the critic's job is to come up with what the critic thinks the work means, which is not necessarily to say he can be 100 percent sure that's what the artist meant or what the audience is going to think.[151]

Rich was so intent on making these links, on making reviewing informative, he could go overboard and his prose could begin to drown in information. An otherwise well-written review of *Mastergate*—a play that does indeed invite comparisons to the real world—bogged down when Rich dragged in references to a Theodore Draper book review from the previous summer and a Frances FitzGerald *New Yorker* article of the week before.[152] Rich could forget that what could be germane in an essay could be inappropriate—even turgid, or numbing—in a review.

THEMES

Rich didn't look at a theatre artist's work in seclusion. If he was not the first critic to point out themes in an author's oeuvre, as Mimi Kramer implies in her article, "Finally Free of Frank," he was the most consistent. "It's insane not to do that," Rich said. "To pretend everything exists in a vacuum and was born yesterday is ridiculous and, I think, a bore to the reader."[153] But this was more than simply a tool for the reader, this finding of themes. As mentioned, outlining

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[151]Rich, interview with the author.

[152]Review of *Mastergate*, 13 October 1989, C3:1.

[153]Rich, interview with the author.

how an artist's work is connected and how it links theatre to the world was part of Rich's way of making theatre more important and was at the core of his criticism.

Rich wrote that Sam Shepard "almost demands we see his plays as a continuum: they bleed together."[154] His review of *A Lie of the Mind* illustrates how he found themes and connections not only among one author's plays, but also themes shared with other authors. *A Lie of the Mind*, said Rich, echoes through Shepard's other recent work. Jake and Beth parallel the characters in *Fool for Love*, and their parents and siblings could have been pieced together from those in *Curse of the Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, and *True West*. Rich went on to link Shepard's themes to those of other American writers, including O'Neill's vision of mirror image fathers and sons locked in combat, Williams's flaky mothers, Albee's "pop-art domestic absurdity," and Twain's characters running away from civilization.[155]

Rich's review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon* placed Lemon in the lineup with Wallace Shawn's other "proper-looking monsters," the most refined people who "say and do the most outrageous things." This is a running gag in Shawn's work, and, in *Aunt Dan* , it "reaches its explosive, horrifying punch line."[156] Rich found that Sondheim's *Into the Woods* "lacks the intensity of feeling of its overlapping predecessors. By making his usual themes overexplicit, Mr. Sondheim has written a show that is at once his most accessible and least dramatic. . . . The elusive, neurotic subtext of the composer's past work

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[154]Review of *Fool for Love*, 27 May 1983, C3:1.

[155]Review of *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[156]Review of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, 29 October 1985, C13:1.

becomes the obvious, conventionally uplifting text this time."[157] In reviewing a revival of Athol Fugard's very early play, *Blood Knot*, Rich pointed out the "seeds" of Fugard's later plays—the simple setting, the small number of characters, the modest framework, the minimal plot, the absence of polemics.[158] As we will see later, Rich did not find themes among playwrights' work alone. He also wrote consistently about the oeuvre of directors, actors, and designers.

HUMANITY

The idea of linking theatre to life may have been at the heart of Rich's championing of plays about homosexuality and AIDS. Here was the most prominent, the most devastating link between the world of theatre and the world beyond. If anything could give the theatre of Rich's time a claim to importance, it would be the handling of the AIDS tragedy. Even when a play on homosexual themes was not as good as it should have been, Rich found a way to champion it.

He wrote with immense tenderness about homosexual characters and themes; we find the word "heroic" turning up again and again in these reviews. His descriptions of Kevin Conroy's producer, sick with AIDS, in *Eastern Standard*, and of the rueful Al, a stand-in for author Albert Innaurato in *Gus and Al*, are gentle and poignant.[159] Rich wrote of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*: "The play's great generosity can be found in the insistence on letting the audience see each camp through the eyes of the other without distorting either point of

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[157]Rich, "Sondheim's Winding Paths," II:1:3.

[158]Review of *Blood Knot*, 11 December 1985, C23:1.

[159]Reviews of *Eastern Standard*, 28 October 1988, C3:1; and *Gus and Al*, 28 February 1989, C17:1.

view, and, as it happens, without bringing a gay character on stage. . . . It does something that the theater must do now more than ever, by leaving an audience exiled from paradise feeling considerably less alone."[160] From *Fifth of July*: "The stand-out is Jeff Daniels as Kenny's tender lover, a doleful, quiet man whose simple love for the hero gives the play its warm and stable center."[161]

Rich used his reviews to remark on a play's relevance, as well as its audience appeal. He did not like everything about Peter Parnell's *Hyde in Hollywood*, but admired its intent: "[It] is a sophisticated attempt to raise the persecution of gay men from the footnotes of mainstream history. . . . There have been few new plays this year with as much to say as 'Hyde in Hollywood'. . . ."[162] In his review of Hartford Stage's production of *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland* , Rich praised the company for showing "the guts to . . . risk aggravating dwindling recession audiences by offering works that put homosexual passions . . . center stage."[163] His follow-up article on the Broadway production of *Falsettos* is considered a landmark for bringing mainstream audiences to plays with homosexual characters. When looking for a show to take his sons to, he spurned other shows with real or spurious family values in favor of *Falsettos*. The article portrayed two pre-teenagers understanding enough to make any "intolerant" adult want to go stand in the corner in shame. Rich wrote: "Was [Simon] surprised to discover that the gay characters in 'Falsettos' were the same in most ways as heterosexuals? 'They

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[160]Review of *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*, 26 June 1991, C11:1.

[161]Review of *Fifth of July*, 6 November 1980, C19:1.

[162]Review of *Hyde in Hollywood*, 30 November 1989, C19:3.

[163]Review of *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*, 15 October 1991, C13:1.

are the same, Dad,' " we are told was the reply.[164]

Occasionally Rich's desire to advance plays on homosexual themes put him at more of a remove from his readers than he would have wanted to admit. It's easy to imagine many of his readers disagreeing with his remark about Terrence McNally's *Bad Habits* that "only the humorless would be offended by a portrait of two prissy, aging male companions locked in an eternal snit-fit."[165]

Rich's humanity was a palpable quality infusing his reviews of many different plays. Shows about alienation and loneliness, loss and abandonment, parents and children affected him deeply. Nowhere did he write with more sensitivity than in his review of *Gypsy*, which, in light of Rich's own background, takes on additional meaning. His review of *'night Mother*, like the play itself, was ineffably sad. His review of *Quartermaine's Terms* was poignant throughout and ended: "While Quartermaine may look and act like a fool, we never doubt that somewhere within that hollow-looking shell hides a lonely man, bleeding."[166]

Like many critics writing during the 1980s and 1990s, Rich took pains to be politically correct. In his reviews of plays by black companies, for example, he sometimes took a softer tone, lifting into the category of mixed review what a reader might sense would otherwise have been a pan. A careful reading of his review of the Negro Ensemble Company's production of *Henrietta* finds that the play had many of the exact problems that most irked Rich—didactic story, predictable, mechanical plot, thin writing, stodgy staging, few surprises, and a "penchant for crimping characters into predetermined ideological

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[164]Frank Rich, "Discovering Family Values at 'Falsettos,' " *New York Times*, 12 July 1992, II:1:1.

[165]Review of *Bad Habits*, 21 March 1990, C13:1.

[166]Review of *Quartermaine's Terms*, 7 January 1983, C3:1.

molds"—problems that usually drew Rich's wrath. Yet the review was written amiably enough, as if designed not to do any damage. It is even one of Rich's shortest reviews, as if he had written all he could in that friendly fashion and could not go on without plunging into the play's shortcomings.[167]

ACTING

A study done by Joseph J. Bellinghiere in his dissertation "A Methodology for a Content Analysis of Theatre Critics' Reviews" (1973) showed that acting was consistently reviewed more favorably than any other element of a production.[168] A less scientific sampling of dissertations and books written about critics also shows a generally favorable attitude toward acting. Certainly Walter Kerr, Rich's mentor in so many ways, emphasized acting in his reviews.

George Jean Nathan, on the other hand, tried to keep the acting element out of his assessments entirely, feeling that, from the standpoint of dramatic criticism, nothing mattered but the play itself and to criticize the actors was to confuse the issue. He wanted to look at the writer's work "uncorrupted by the parasitic art that has been laid over it."[169] As we have seen, Rich is primarily concerned with writing. But his reviews did not shortchange the acting element, and he certainly was closer to Kerr than to Nathan in his view of its importance.

Apart from what we can glean from his reviews, Rich offered little help in trying to determine what he felt constitutes good acting. He did not discuss such

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[167]Review of *Henrietta*, 29 January 1985, C13:1.

[168]Bellinghiere analyzed representative reviews of Clive Barnes, Martin Gottfried, and Richard Watts written during the 1967-68, 1968-69, and 1969-70 seasons. The other elements in Bellinghiere's breakdown were script, director, and global, which included all elements not included in the first three categories. His analysis determined that each of the critics reviewed acting most favorably and the script least favorably.

[169]Frick, 123.

specifics in interviews, apparently not wanting to put any strictures on himself—or on acting. When questioned, he fell back on the idea that he went to a play open-minded, curious about the acting and was open to anything that worked. He also shied away from specifics when asked how important acting was in forming his opinion of a play. Acting is important in most traditional plays, he said, but he saw enough strong productions overcome bad acting and enough weak productions founder despite good acting to try to put even a general value on it.[170]

As a broad statement, we may say that Rich was pleased with the quality of acting available to the New York stage. In his year-end reviews, he consistently wrote about the high caliber of acting. In December 1982, he wrote that the many gifted artists needed more plays "large enough to contain their grandest dreams."[171] A year later, he wrote, "In 1983, as always, there were many more excellent performances than plays."[172] His 1985 wrap-up also extolled the high quality of acting in New York and, the next year, he said, "To cite all the excellent performances of 1986 would take an insert roughly comparable to the annual listing of marathon runners."[173] On occasion, he even intoned the lament within reviews: "Watching actors of this top caliber try to breathe life into nonexistent roles, one is again reminded of how impoverished the opportunities have become for them . . . in the New York musical theater."[174]

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[170]Rich, interview with the author.

[171]Frank Rich, "The Creative Source Was Off Broadway," *New York Times*, 26 December 1982, II:3:5.

[172]Frank Rich, "All in All, There Were Bright Spots Aplenty," *New York Times*, 1 June 1986, II:3:1.

[173]Rich, "True to Form," II:3:1.

[174]Review of *Brownstone*, 7 November 1986, C3:4.

An analysis of his reviews shows that Rich most often praised acting that takes chances, that inhabits the character, that is nuanced, that exhibits precise character details. His criticism was most often given to acting that is sloppy or bland, that skims the surface of the character, that is full of artifice and technique. He didn't like to see actors "shifting gears," he disliked mannerisms unlinked to the character, milking laughs, or a ritualistic, mechanical quality that relies on a "repertory of devices . . . mechanically applied to the text."[175] He was no great fan of breast beating, arm waving, and generally out-Heroding Herod.

Vanessa Redgrave's performance in *Orpheus Descending* offers almost a compendium of the qualities that Rich prized—she is daring, she penetrates to the heart of the character, she forgoes artifice, she acts in the spaces, the "in-betweens." "What Ms. Redgrave does," wrote Rich, "is fill out each moment, however tiny, with the dramatic (if sometimes funny) conflict of emotions, taking any risk she can that might allow her character to seep into every crevice of the play." In the same play, Anne Twomey and Tammy Grimes "bring actressy technique" instead of Redgrave's "transparency of emotion."[176]

Kathy Bates excels in *'night Mother* because she does not engage in "actorly artifice," she does not make a play for the audience's sympathy, she simply "embodies" the character of the daughter.[177] In *Breaking Legs*, Philip Bosco "lampoons a tough guy" instead of embodying one; in her one-woman show, *The Big Love*, Tracy Ullman condescends to the character instead of inhabiting her; Zoe Caldwell, in her one-woman show, *Lillian*, "rarely ascends from first-rate impersonation to compelling characterization"; and the actresses

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[175]Review of *Krapp's Last Tape*, 5 September 1986, C3:1.

[176]Review of *Orpheus Descending*, 25 September 1989, C15:4.

[177]Review of *'night Mother*, 12 January 1983, C15:4.

in *From the Mississippi Delta* are simply telling stories rather than "inhabiting" them.[178] The one-person shows that Rich raved about—Lilly Tomlin in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Eric Bogosian in *Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll*—are those in which the performer is versatile enough to really inhabit a variety of characters rather than simply skimming through them. In *The Misanthrope*, Brian Bedford is "playing for keeps" but the rest of the cast adds a "layer of artifice."[179] The actors in the National Actor's Theatre's first production, *The Crucible*, saw the air, thump their chests, and declaim to the balcony.[180]

As with writing, the best acting takes into account what is not said as well as what is said; acting in the spaces, the silences. No "between-the-lines nuance is lost by the ensemble of eight performers" in the Irish cast of *Dancing at Lughnasa*.[181] Rich gave high marks for intelligent acting, but, as with writing, intelligence was not enough. Dustin Hoffman's understated, intelligent performance as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* "leaves one thinking about this endlessly debated play without for a second being challenged or moved by it."[182] He recognized when actors elevated writing that, in other hands, might fail. In *Digby*, Anthony Heald and Roxanne Hart "bring unceasing warmth and reality to characters who might also be taken for unappealing stereotypes."[183]

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[178]Reviews of *Breaking Legs*, 20 May 1991, C11:1; *The Big Love*, 4 March 1991, C11:1; *Lillian*, 17 January 1986, C3:1; and *From the Mississippi Delta*, 12 November 1991, C13:1.

[179]Review of *The Misanthrope*, 28 January 1983, C3:1.

[180]Review of *The Crucible*, 11 December 1991, C17:1.

[181]Review of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, 25 October 1991, C1:4.

[182]Review of *The Merchant of Venice*, 20 December 1989, C15:1.

[183]Review of *Digby*, 20 March 1985, C17:1.

Rich usually reserved his comments on acting until late in a review, but when the acting was outstanding, he would begin the review with that and weave it throughout, supporting his assessment by detailing specific things that the actor had done. Of Ian McKellen's portrayal of Salieri in *Amadeus*, he wrote:

> After Salieri's first, almost mystical encounter with his rival's music, his posture and voice begin to warp in agony. In one trembling, hallucinatory moment, the contemplation of Mozart's scores sends him collapsing to the floor in a dead faint. . . . In one [scene], Mr. McKellen slowly turns ashen as he listens to the giddy Mozart improving a Salieri composition at the piano. Clumsily trying to seduce Mozart's wife . . . Mr. McKellen rises from his initial sexual ardor to explode in a wounding paroxysm of self-hatred. In a climactic scene inspired by the mysterious history of Mozart's Requiem, Salieri goes to his enemy's house dressed as a specter of death. Hiding behind a grim mask, Mr. McKellen becomes a hideous, eerie devil who can't separate his own fearful nightmares from those he is trying to bring to his prey. As he disintegrates in defeat, we see the birth of the aged, cackling Salieri, slack-jawed and stooped, who is the evening's narrator.[184]

In *Pack of Lies*, Rosemary Harris "drifts into nervous collapse in disconcerting stages. Her eyes, voice, posture and, finally, her hands surrender their spirit as the character's conscience cracks." The blood drains from her face as she continues "chattering neighborly pleasantries," and she finally comes to where she can "hardly finish a sentence without vomiting in her kitchen sink."[185] *Virginia* is an undistinguished script but the Public's production features a fine performance by Kate Nelligan. At times, her "cultured English tones drop to an owlish hoot," at times "the voice rises to an ecstatic crescendo." "While the words will later thicken and break with both self-loathing and the fear of madness, Miss Nelligan never forgets that Woolf knew happiness, too.

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[184]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

[185]Review of *Pack of Lies*, 12 February 1985, C13:4.

Speaking of the mother she adored and prematurely lost, this Virginia lets loose with girlish music and broad, toothy smiles." Her hands, at first "either aflutter or calmly clasped," later "become tight little fists, battering away at private demons." Finally, "they form an unstable cat's cradle of raw nerves and bone."[186]

Rich also often began his review with reference to the acting when it was excellent but the play was not—John Lithgow in *Requiem for a Heavyweight*; Jessica Tandy in *Foxfire*, Robert Morse in a weakly scripted *Tru*; Maggie Smith in *Lettice and Lovage*, a "modest excuse" for her acting; Kevin Kline's intelligent performance in an otherwise mediocre *Hamlet*.[187] In "Exit the Critic," Rich said he learned early in his tenure at the *Times* that, if he had anything positive to say, he should say it first because "the artists who do valiant work in a mediocre enterprise are, in the journalistic sense, the real news—the lead."[188] Scathing as he could be at times, Rich indeed seemed not to have forgotten this.

If both a play and the performances were bad, Rich could be brutal with the actors. In his pan of the Public's *Cymbeline*, he wrote: "George Bartenieff makes one of the most forgettable titular roles in Shakespeare indelible by mauling every line."[189] If a play was essentially good but was marred by one or more weak performances, he was less caustic toward the actors. He did not elaborate as he did about an excellent performance and provided few examples of what the actor did wrong. A feeling akin to regret might even come through. Of a production of *Fifth of July*, which Rich generally liked, he wrote:

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[186]Review of *Virginia*, 15 March 1985, C13:4.

[187]Reviews of *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, 8 March 1985, C3:1; *Foxfire*, 12 November 1982, C3:1; *Tru*, 15 December 1989, C3:1; *Lettice and Lovage*, 26 March 1990, C11:1; and *Hamlet*, 30 March 1986, II:3:1.

[188]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 36.

[189]Review of *Cymbeline*, 1 June 1989, C15:1.

"[Christopher] Reeve works earnestly, and in the later scenes he lets us see some of Kenny's pain. But by then it's too late. His placid face never suggests someone who has lost his legs in the hell of Southeast Asia, and his voice lacks presence and maturity. At most, he gives us the wry surface of the character. . . ."[190] In a 1991 review, Rich acknowledged that the biggest problem of *I Hate Hamlet* is the performance by Evan Handler, but Rich did not lambaste him.[191]

Rich was not as concerned with an actor's physical characteristics as critics of an earlier time so often were. It was not usual for him to comment on an actor's voice and, although he did appreciate and mention physical beauty, he didn't demand it from his leading men or women. Like directing, acting always received more space in Rich's reviews of revivals. Along with the director's concept and execution of that concept, acting was the most important element in critiquing a revival.

Michael Goldstein wrote that Rich's background as a film reviewer allowed him to review "movie stars" in plays without the anti-Hollywood prejudice that many reviewers have.[192] Rich indeed had no trouble with the idea of a star performance or "star turn" given by a veteran of the theatre. In fact he was occasionally chagrined to have to report that a star was left stranded by weaker supporting players, as when Ian McKellen finds himself, in *Wild Honey*, in the "predicament of the star who strains to carry a frail supporting cast."[193] And there was an appreciation—sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit—for

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[190]Review of *Fifth of July*, 6 November 1980, C19:1.

[191]Review of *I Hate Hamlet*, 9 April 1991, C13:3.

[192]Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," 21.

[193]Review of *Wild Honey*, 19 December 1986, C3:1.

such actors as Kevin Kline and Bernadette Peters who do not abandon the stage. But some of Rich's reviews belied Goldstein's comment about "movie stars." Rich said that the whole idea of stardom can warp the creative process and that, if he were a producer, he would cast an actor who could best do the role, not one who was most likely to be in *People* magazine. He also said that the inclusion of stars did not effect his review; that it mattered only to the audience, or at least that is what producers believe.[194] While Rich was fair toward film and television stars cast in new plays, he seemed to expect the worst when they were in the classics, especially the Public's Shakespeare festival. When the stars performed poorly, his criticism had an air of "just as I expected," and when a star performed well, he offered praise, but it usually was tinged with surprise. The actors in the star-studded *Twelfth Night* produced by the Public in July 1989 were almost all bad, according to Rich, and in a review of a *Twelfth Night* produced later that year at the Arena Stage in Washington, he seemed surprised to report that Kelly McGillis was outstanding.[195]

DIRECTING

Directing was the most difficult aspect of a production for Rich to critique. He said:

> The biggest problem a critic has is not in saying whether the directing is good or bad, but . . . in assessing what the director did. And then you have to use educated guesswork largely based on your experience of seeing a director's work over a long period of time, if a director has a body of work. . . . With a new play it is very difficult to tell.[196]

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[194]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[195]Reviews of the Public's *Twelfth Night*, 10 July 1989, C13:1; and Arena Stage's *Twelfth Night*, 4 October 1989, C17:1.

[196]Rich, interview with the author.

Rich placed supreme importance on direction in revivals, especially revivals of the classics, and it is here that we can best see what Rich expected from a director. Simply put, he asked the director to have a vision and to carry it through—to explore the text and find its meaning, its passions, its emotions, and present them through a personal, inventive, passionate concept. He allowed leeway in style, in staging, in setting, in design, in cutting, even in alterations, but the director's vision and the text had to be complimentary; to simply find a radical, or even an innovative, way to stage a work but at the expense of the text was not acceptable. The director must yoke the vision and play together, not plow one under with the other; he must explore the contradictions, not smother or eviscerate them. Director Frank Galati has met Shakespeare on these terms in a Chicago production of *The Winter's Tale.* Galati, wrote Rich, "luxuriate[s] in the diversity of late Shakespeare instead of attempting to tame it." Consequently, the audience "shares the shiver of rebirth, unmistakably Shakespeare's, that Mr. Galati has found in his own way." Galati has taken an eclectic, but coherent, approach to the text. A director may imprint his own vision on a production, but this is not "license to practice chaotic self-indulgence, but to spin one's own coherent, if irrational dream logic."[197] JoAnne Akalaitis likewise finds her own world within the universe of *Henry IV*, but not at the author's expense. "One never feels that Ms. Akalaitis's own artistic signature is defacing Shakespeare's vision. The director is earnestly searching for, and often finding, common ground with a classic."[198] In *Orpheus Descending*, director Peter Hall abandons realism and "has the guts to embrace and explore the contradictions in Williams's play rather than to attempt to

[197]Review of *The Winter's Tale*, 31 January 1990, C15:1.

[198]Review of *Henry IV*, 28 February 1991, C15:1.

reconcile them in one rigid style or another. 'Orpheus' is an unwieldy mix of myth, ritual (a conjure man included), social realism and bluesy poetry. Why not revel in the author's imagination instead of trying . . . to domesticate it?"[199]

Rich liked the director to take risks. A 1988 article from London applauded directors at the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company for continuing to take bold approaches in unearthing and illuminating the grit, the soul, the heart of plays.[200] Rich's incessant complaint throughout the years, on the other hand, was against by-the-book staging that does not explore the contradictions within the text, but presents it as a thing solved. Keith Hack is "courageously impudent" for his radical reinterpretation that turns *Strange Interlude* into an enjoyable, if deranged, comedy of sexual anxiety. In doing this, Hack unearths what is "genuine and vital" in the script. "In liberating the script from naturalism . . . Hack rethinks nearly every moment he can."[201] Conversely, Clifford Williams's production of *Richard II* with Derek Jacobi is a drab, dry effort that "won't risk a single surprise."[202] Director Richard Jordan's perfunctory staging of the Public's *Macbeth* doesn't deal with the larger questions of how the scenes come together to "present a dramatic portrait of power lust, political terror and madness"; and the approach that Liviu Ciulei takes in his naturalistic revival of *The Time of Your Life* is "pure stock" with no "bold directorial gesture."[203] A staging without vision is invariably a staging

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[199]Review of *Orpheus Descending*, 25 September 1989, C15:4.

[200]Frank Rich, "Sympathetic Richard II," *New York Times*, 22 December 1988, C11:1.

[201]Review of *Strange Interlude*, 22 February 1985, C3:1.

[202]Review of *Richard II*, 22 December 1988, C11:1.

[203]Reviews of *Macbeth*, 17 January 1990, C13:4; and *The Time of Your Life*, 2 October 1991, C17:1.

without passion. John Dexter's revival of *Threepenny Opera*, starring Sting, lacks both passion and a "scalding style." There is no visual focus to the staging, no clear line of attack, and no variation in pace.[204] Michael Greif's *Pericles* at the Public is full of interesting conceits, but has no underlying passion. There is nothing wrong in principle with Greif's hodge-podge, leapfrogging style, but there is "no personal vision that might weave the many loose threads into a magical, dreamy tapestry."[205] Agree or disagree with Adrian Noble's concept for *Measure for Measure*—set in an eighteenth century Vienna full of Hogarthian prostitutes and fops—it offers a lesson for American theatre and directors: "It is a carefully thought-out approach to the play, rigorously applied, textually faithful and logical on its own terms."[206]

Although no text was sacrosanct to Rich, the director's vision must not distort or, worse, dilute what he has been given to work with. Michael Cacoyannis's production of *The Bacchae* for Circle in the Square comes across as a "remote storybook" that captures none of the power of Euripides or "that strange dark god" that struggles for power within us, and turns a "living classic into an inaccessible museum piece."[207] John Malcovich misdirects Steppenwolf's production of *The Caretaker* in a jokey, sitcom fashion and "deflates Pinter's taut dramatic structure," and the Roundabout's 1991 production of *The Homecoming*, under the direction of Gordon Edelstein, has made Pinter's message less obscure, less startling and, consequently, has

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[204]Review of *The Threepenny Opera*, 6 November 1989, C13:4.

[205]Review of *Pericles*, 25 November 1991, C13:1.

[206]Rich, "London Theater Leads a Double Life," II:1:1.

[207]Review of *The Bacchae*, 3 October 1980, C3:1.

dissipated the play's terror.[208]

Rich sought many of the same attributes in the director of a new play that he looked for in the director of a revival: perhaps, most of all, an "unfailing sensitivity to the authors' intentions."[209] In reviewing a new play, his comments, good or bad, usually came within a broader statement on the production; he rarely focused specifically on the direction. Typical are these lines from *Eleemosynary*: "The cast, under the fluid direction of Lynne Meadow, makes the most of its own opportunities," and from *Shirley Valentine*: "[Simon] Callow, himself an excellent actor, undoubtedly played an important role in facilitating the seamless case of Miss Collins's performance."[210] Even when Rich deemed a new play outstanding, he usually credited the writing and kept most of his focus there, limiting his comments on the direction to its being "unerring" or "exemplary" but rarely trying to define it further. In a new play, one can almost always skip to the sixth or seventh paragraph to find the line or two given over to the director.

In addition to passion, inventiveness, vision, and a respect for the author's intentions, Rich liked directors who are meticulous, who have impeccable timing, who bring an edginess to plays that need it, who understand and maintain pacing, whose staging injects vitality, who can strike a balance between comedy and drama, who can negotiate a play's mood shifts and reconcile conflicting tones, and who are adept at such practical matters as conquering a problematic stage.

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[208]Reviews of *The Caretaker*, 31 January 1986, C3:1; and *The Homecoming*, 28 October 1991, C13:1.

[209]Rich, "Personal Voices Made Plays Worth Watching," II:3:1.

[210]Reviews of *Eleemosynary*, 10 May 1989, C15:3; and *Shirley Valentine*, 17 February 1989, C3:1.

Only rarely did Rich lay all the blame for a failed new play at the director's feet, in part because a play that fails usually has faults enough to go around. But we can see a list of directors' mistakes that Rich found debilitating, starting with miscasting. Rich held to the axiom that casting is the single most important decision that a director will make. After critics—including Rich—branded the stage adaptation of *Singing in the Rain* a disappointment, Rich felt the need to write an article defending its star Don Correia. Correia, wrote Rich, is only the most visible target; as much of the blame should go to director Twyla Tharp who cast Correia and, in doing so, asked him "to be someone he never has been and may never become." The star of the musical does not have to be another Gene Kelly, Rich said, but he does at least need "his own idiosyncratic luster." Almost every other principal also is miscast, Rich said, and the production probably was "doomed the moment its performers were hired." Rich went on to list other recent productions hurt by miscasting—*Mayor, Painting Churches, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Passion*, the female *The Odd Couple*. He also listed directors—Mike Nichols, Jerry Zaks, Michael Bennett, Clifford Williams, Billy Hopkins, Risa Bramon—who almost always have well-cast plays and said that cannot simply be coincidence.[211] In other reviews, Rich said that Tommy Tune must shoulder the blame for miscasting *Grand Hotel*, Christopher Morahan has miscast most of the company for Michael Frayn's *Wild Honey*, Marshall Mason has blundered in casting Christopher Reeve in the pivotal role of Kenny in *Fifth of July*, and the major, perhaps fatal, error that Matt Casella makes in directing *In Trousers* is the "charmless casting" of the lead.[212] *Secret Rapture* also fell

[211]Frank Rich, "If Actors Are Miscast," *New York Times*, 11 August 1985, II:1:1.

[212]Reviews of *Grand Hotel*, 13 November 1989, C13:3; *Wild Honey*, 19 December 1986, C3:1; *Fifth of July*, 6 November 1980, C19:1; and *In Trousers*, 27 March 1985, C19:1.

out of favor when it came to New York in part because David Hare miscast his girlfriend, Blair Brown. (Miscasting is an even more common criticism in Rich's reviews of the classics, pointing back to an earlier conclusion that Rich might not be as receptive as some have suggested to packing a play with "movie stars.") Another early mistake, along with poor casting, is misconceiving the production. Andrew Cadiff errs by treating the musical *Brownstone* like a documentary when it needs stylization instead, and director Ellis Rabb has misconceived *The Philadelphia Story* entirely, including music and set, so much so that "it goes astray before a single actor appears on stage."[213] Rabb, as director and adaptor, also has misconceived and mutilated Arthur Schnitzler's Anatol—now called *The Loves of Anatol*—in every way possible, turning a "delicious melancholy comedy" into a vulgar boulevard farce.[214]

Rich faulted directors for cluttered direction; for sloppiness; for erratic or undisciplined handling of actors, for simply not "helping" them when they seem at sea, for allowing flattened performances where actors emphasize only a single personality trait, for letting them beat their breasts, declaim to the balcony, mug, and milk laughs unchecked; for letting laughs die; for approaching a script in such a way that any possible laughter is "smothered" ahead of time; for plodding, lumbering staging, and heavy-handedness (blame shared with the writer); for moving actors aimlessly about the stage; for fits of kinetic energy tossed about helter-skelter in a hopeless attempt to keep afloat a play that should rightfully be sunk. Matt Casella "succumbs" to *In Trousers*'s weaknesses instead of fighting them, Pat Birch fails to at least "camouflage"

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[213]Reviews of *Brownstone*, 7 November 1986, C3:4; and *The Philadelphia Story*, 17 November 1980, C15:1.

[214]Review of *The Loves of Anatol*, 7 March 1985, C19:5.

Raggedy Ann's many problems, and the director of *Paradise for the Worried*—a mixture of words, movement, music and images—doesn't succeed in getting the text, music and dance to cohere.[215]

The Public's production of *True West* offers a good look at what Rich saw as areas in which a director might fail. The play had only what Rich called a "nominal" director in Robert Woodruff, who quit during previews and disowned the production. Rich wrote:

> You know a play has no director when funny dialogue dies before it reaches the audience. Or when two lead actors step on each other's lines and do "business" rather than create characters. Or when entrances and scene-endings look arbitrary rather than preplanned. Or when big farcical sequences . . . clatter about the stage creating confusion rather than mirth. Or when an evening's climax—the mystical death embrace of two fratricidal brothers—is so vaguely choreographed it looks like a polka.[216]

On the other hand, Rich said, some scripts are so bad—*The Rose Quartet, Beside Herself*—it would be silly to fault the director for being unable to do anything with them.

Rich said that part of a reviewer's task is to make connections between a writer's works, that readers expect this and a reviewer would be foolish to consider each work as if it existed in a vacuum. He treated directors the same way. "The trouble," wrote Rich in his review of *Lend Me a Tenor*, "is not [Jerry] Zaks' timing and slapstick choreography, which are as fast and stylish as one expects from the director of 'Anything Goes' and 'The Front Page.' " The review goes on to mention Zaks's work on *House of Blue Leaves* and *Wenceslas*

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[215]Reviews of *In Trousers*, 27 March 1985, C19:1; *Raggedy Ann*, 17 October 1986, C3:4; and *Paradise for the Worried*, 6 April 1990, C33:1.

[216]Review of *True West*, 24 December 1980, C9:1.

Square.[217] In his pan of *Brownstone*, Rich wrote, "It's hard to fathom that the plodding pacing and awkward scene endings of this occasion were devised by the same man [Andrew Cadiff] who so relentlessly turned up the voltage of 'Three Guys Naked From the Waist Down.' "[218] Most reviews worked in at least some mention of a director's earlier work, and some directors were almost never mentioned without their signature pieces—JoAnne Akalaitis's *Dead End Kids* and productions of Franz Xaver Kroetz, Michael Bennett's *Dreamgirls* (even more so than *A Chorus Line*), Michael Enger's *Eastern Standard.*

Rich came to know directors' strengths and weaknesses over time and brought these overall assessments into specific reviews. Michael Grief is "at his weakest in directing actors"; his strength is production and its look.[219] The staging of *In This Fallen City* by Marshall Mason, at Circle Repertory Company, is "characteristic." Mason is "at his considerable best when dealing with emotional conflicts and resolutions, at his awkward worst when choreographing physical action."[220]

DESIGN

Design was less a stepchild of theatre arts with Rich than with any other critic of his time. In spite of not having practical experience working in theatre, he usually was given high marks for his ability to assess technical and design work. In *Theater Week* in 1990, Charles Marowitz and Martin Gottfried, debating Rich's abilities, could agree on only two things—that Rich wrote with

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[217]Review of *Lend Me a Tenor*, 3 March 1989, C3:1.

[218]Review of *Brownstone*, 7 November 1986, C3:4.

[219]Review of *A Bright Room Called Day*, 8 January 1991, C11:1.

[220]Review of *In This Fallen City*, 26 September 1986, C3:1.

insight and authority on scenic and artistic design, and on choreography.[221]

Rich had an early interest in design. When he saw his first play, *The Pajama Game*, he was most fascinated by the set changes and for years afterward he recreated sets from productions he had seen, even supplying them with turntables and stick figures. Years later, when he decided to write a book about theatre, he chose as his subject the designer Boris Aronson. Rich's demands that a production engage all the senses, that it be a "total" theatre piece, led him to place much importance on every element of a production.

Rich's ability to write comprehensively about design, however, developed during his tenure. In his earliest days at the *Times*, he, like most other critics, afforded the design work only the slightly-more-than-perfunctory one or two lines. A 1980 review of *Amadeus* said that John Bury's design "creates an ingenious stage-within-the-stage" and helps director Peter Hall create tableaux that "portray a distant, rococo world."[222] It is not difficult to imagine the later Rich making much more of the part played by this stage-within-the-stage in the world that playwright Peter Shaffer had created. A review of *Barnum* from that same year said that the sets deserve star billing along with Jim Dale, but spent little time on them.[223] Later in his career, if the design were one of the "stars" of the show, Rich often would weave throughout his review a discussion of the design's contribution.

Even when the design received no more than a line or two, and that near

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[221]Marowitz wrote an article critical of Rich's tenure, "1980-1990: Rich Years or Lean Years," *Theater Week*, 19 February 1990. The next week, Gottfried's article "Frank Rich Defended," and Marowitz's "A Rebuttal," both appeared (*Theater Week*, 26 February 1990, 25-29). Marowitz liked little about Rich as a critic except his ability to assess designer's work. Gottfried defended Rich against most charges, with the exception of his harshness.

[222]Review of *Amadeus*, 18 December 1980, C17:1.

[223]Review of *Barnum*, 1 May 1980, C17:1.

the end of the review, Rich did put that small amount of space to good use, going beyond "it was good" to comment on how the design played a part in the production, how it added to the feel. In *The Old Boy*, a play that moves back and forth between the present and the past, "Nancy Schertler's leafy, memory shaded lighting helps keep two distinct eras of prep school history in constant dialogue." Christopher Barrecu's set for *Our Country's Good*, a play in which convicts in Australia act out *The Recruiting Officer*, is "invaluable" because it "suggests both the historical and backstage realms of the play." In *Fifth of July*, John Lee Beatty's "expansive weatherbeaten homestead blends the sensibilities of Chekhov and Mark Twain" just as Lanford Wilson's script does. In *A Lie of the Mind*, the music of the Red Clay Ramblers and the "hallucinatory lighting" help "regulate the imaginative flow."[224]

Rich would give a designer credit even when he disliked most other aspects of a production. After watching a *Grand Hotel* that relied more on set, lighting, and costumes than on book or score, "one remains haunted by this show's imagery. One does, however, forget nearly everything else."[225] Almost the only factor in favor of the mawkish *Florida Crackers* is a "splendidly tacky John Lee Beatty set, which captures the crackers' bachelor pad in every detail, from the salmon-colored paint on the stucco walls to the indeterminately hideous shade of the shag carpet."[226]

When the design did not work, for practical or more aesthetic reasons, Rich said so. Heidi Landesman's scenic design for *The Secret Garden* "is fabulous to look at but not hospitable to actors, who have to fight to be in focus."

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[224]Reviews of *The Old Boy*, 6 May 1991, C11:4; *Our Country's Good*, 30 April 1991, C13:4; *Fifth of July*, 6 November 1980, C19:1; and *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[225]Review of *Grand Hotel*, 13 November 1989, C13:3.

[226]Review of *Florida Crackers*, 2 June 1989, C3:1.

The set for *The Philadelphia Story* is a catastrophe; it creates logistical problems, "blurs our focus and seems to swallow up the cast." *Park Your Car in Harvard Yard* has a set that "overzealously fulfills the script's description of the teacher's home as a 'pathetic hovel.' " The set for the Broadway production of *Secret Rapture* doesn't work because England is almost a "character" in the play and Santo Loquasto's set does not reveal this.[227]

When the design worked as an integral part of the vision for the play, Rich wrote in a way that acknowledged this. In *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, Rich's language and choice of words throughout the review reflected an understanding of how the design was integral to what John Guare and director Peter Hall were trying to do. The smoking, mysterious classical Tony Walton set "redolent of the Bronze Age" that greets an audience as it enters the theatre helps immediately establish the "take-it-or-leave-it" proposition that Guare puts forward. Rich credited Walton and the other designers with giving the production the spectacular treatment, "part Etruscan, part Magritte, that it demands." He wrote, "The other shifts in the landscape are so dramatic that even before the house lights dim the audience knows it is being shoved into an alien world."[228]

Realizing that Ariane Mnouchkine was working toward a theatre beyond language and plot in *Les Atrides*, Rich detailed the non-literary ways in which she conjured up a ritualistic theatre of the past. The director dug into the primordial passions

> with the multi-cultural devices that typify the entire cycle. The playing area is a vast wooden corral, a neutral space reminiscent of the sandboxes used by that other Parisian theatrical visionary, Peter Brook.

[227]Reviews of *The Secret Garden*, 26 April 1991, C1:1; *The Philadelphia Story*, 17 November 1980, C15:1; *Park Your Car in Harvard Yard*, 8 November 1991, C1:4; and *The Secret Rapture*, 27 October 1989, C3:1.

[228]Review of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, 19 March 1992, C15:3.

> The performers appear in opulent ceremonial costumes of vaguely Asian provenance. The stagehands are Kabuki-ish while the chorus's choreography emulates the Kathakali dance dramas of Southern India. The musical accompaniment. . . careers from eclectic Eastern folk improvisations to Kabuki percussion to recorded Indian music to what might be a hyperventilating Bernard Herrmann film score for Alfred Hitchcock.

He pointed out the other elements that added to the effect: the "cold, blue lighting that shrouds Orestes' return," the buzzing of strings, a tall, windblown altar that first reveals Clytemnestra and later becomes her death bed, and the wooden arena that becomes a bullring from which escape is impossible. All these elements help establish an ominous mood that "exerts a subterranean . . . pull on a viewer's psyche."[229]

In *Six Degrees of Separation*, Rich saw the two-sided Kadinsky painting that twirls over the Kittredge living room as symbolizing the idea, running throughout the play, that there are two sides to every story. Tony Walton's two-level set with its picture frames for characters to walk into and out of reflects the dual nature, the double vision imprinted on every part of the play. Rich wrote, "In this production, every collaborator helps create an exquisite balance between high comedy and rending pathos. . . ."[230]

When the situation warranted, Rich began his review with the play's design. His review of *Coastal Disturbances* started with a long description of Dennis Parichy's lighting because that lighting established the central metaphor of the play—that the changing weather above reflects the volatile emotions and states of the characters below.[231] Rich's review of Timothy Mason's *Babylon*

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[229]Review of *Les Atrides*, 6 October 1992, C11:3.

[230]Rich, "Guidebook to the Soul of a City," 1 July 1990, II:1:1.

[231]Review of *Coastal Disturbances*, 20 November 1986, C25:1.

Gardens started with two paragraphs on Loy Arcenas's gray drab design illustrating the poverty, crime, and cynicism of the city's urban war zone, and he began his review of *K2* talking about the awe-inspiring mountain that Ming Cho Lee created.[232]

Rich wrote as evocatively about design as he did about other aspects of a production. From a Chicago production of *The Winter's Tale*: "Each turn is bathed by [Jennifer] Tipton in a fairy-tale glow that seamlessly shifts as the action does from a silvery mid winter dusk to a creamy snowstorm to a verdant harvest dawn." *Miss Saigon* opens with a sunrise that bleeds into a hazy panorama of a Saigon morning as "delicate as an Oriental print."[233] His main stated goal as a reviewer—to recreate the event for the reader—was often best accomplished in his reviews that intertwined his critique of design; his review of *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun* offers a sterling example.

Rich's penchant for trivia, for comparisons and contrasts could surface as blatantly in his discussion of design as anywhere else, sometimes to good effect, sometimes to little or none. In one review, he said a set that captures the Gothic tone of a Eudora Welty short story adapted for the stage is "pure Edward Hopper"[234]; but in other reviews, his observations were less helpful—the set and lighting for *The Artificial Jungle* were compared to Sam Fuller's film *Pickup on South Street*, and the imposing courthouse in *The Front Page* "smack[s] a bit of Marienbad."[235] Rich did have an eye for detail that designers could appreciate.

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[232]Reviews of *Babylon Gardens*, 9 October 1991, C17:1; and *K2*, 31 March 1983, C16:5.

[233]Reviews of *The Winter's Tale*, 31 January 1990, C15:1; and *Miss Saigon*, 12 April 1991, C1:2.

[234]Review of *The Hitch-Hikers*, 1 March 1985, C3:1.

[235]Reviews of *The Artificial Jungle*, 23 September 1986, C13:4; and *The Front Page*, 24 November 1986, C13:1.

He pointed out the great lengths to which *Will Rogers Follies*' costumer Willa Kim had gone in lining a 10-gallon hat and in providing an "intricately stitched pattern" for a pair of suspenders.[236] At the Theatre du Soleil production of *Les Atrides* he noticed that the rugs in the actors' roped-off dressing rooms, visible to the audience before the show, were color-coordinated with the costume accessories.[237]

Design often plays a crucial role in a director's concept for a revival. Rich gauged the effectiveness of that design, whether it supported or detracted from the concept. The decision by JoAnne Akalaitis to set her *Cymbeline* among Celtic ruins in Victorian England is disastrous, though the design only adds to an already dreadful production. On the other hand, setting *Henry IV* "at once in its actual period and in all of history" allows Akalaitis to make use of inventive spectacle and metaphor.[238]

Rich drew attention to a designer's continuing body of work much as he did to that of a writer or a director, and would even mention work he particularly admired in reviews of productions by other designers. Tony Walton's set for *Six Degrees* is "a fittingly abstract variation on [his] 'Grand Hotel.' "[239] For *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Graciele Daniele reprises her choreography from *The Pirates of Penzance*.[240] The set for *Hamlet* is "much like the towers in Robin Wagner's visionary set for 'Dreamgirls.' "[241] He might also disdainfully mention

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[236]Review of *The Will Rogers Follies*, 2 May 1991, C17:1.

[237]Review of *Les Atrides*, 6 October 1992, C11:3.

[238]Reviews of *Cymbeline*, 1 June 1989, C15:1; and *Henry IV*, 28 February 1991, C15:1.

[239]Review of *Six Degrees of Separation*, 15 June 1990, C1:2.

[240]Review of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, 23 August 1985, C3:3.

[241]Review of *Hamlet*, 30 March 1986, II:3:1.

the design as a poor man's knockoff of some other show, some other designer. *Meet Me in St. Louis* mimics but never really approaches the design of Oliver Smith, the costumes of Miles White, and the choreography of Michael Kidd and Onma White.[242]

[242]Review of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, 3 November 1989, C3:1.

CHAPTER FOUR

FRANK RICH'S PLACE IN AMERICAN DRAMATIC CRITICISM

It would be impossible to discuss Frank Rich as a critic intelligently without considering the issue of power—his in particular and the power of the *New York Times* in general. This chapter will look first at that power issue. It then will attempt to define what Rich was doing as a critic, how he was changing criticism, and what legacy he has left to dramatic criticism and theatre.

The reasons for the *Times*'s critic's power and influence are many, intertwined, far-reaching, and often documented. I will offer only an outline here. The first consideration is the dwindling number of daily newspapers and, thus, critic's voices, in the city. In the 1920s, there were 14 daily newspapers in New York City, in the mid-1930s, there were nine, in the early 1960s there were seven. During most of Rich's tenure, there were three, one of which was often flirting with insolvency. What that means is, during Brooks Atkinson's reign at the *Times* throughout much of the middle of the century, there was at least the possibility that his pronouncements on a play could be contradicted six, seven, eight times—and on that same day! Not so with Rich. (The advent of television reviewers must be given some consideration in this idea of the number of "dailies," but having these several television critics does not come close to recreating the situation present prior to 1960.)

This is not to suggest that the *Times* was not the number one voice on theatre before Rich. It was. Part of the reason was Atkinson himself, whose respected opinion, long tenure, and reputation for integrity and intelligence helped cement the *Times*'s status. In addition, the *Times* is a well-respected

newspaper in any field. When the *Times* speaks, people pay attention.

The *Times* has long been committed to extensive coverage of the arts, nowhere more so than in theatre. Because of that coverage, people interested in the theatre read the *Times*. Producers, then, advertise in the *Times* because it reaches people interested in theatre. Producers, even as they have decried the power of the *Times*, have bolstered that power by pulling quotes from the *Times* and other newspapers and plastering them across their marquees and flyers. If the *Times*'s review is favorable, it inevitably will top the list. As has often been pointed out, complaints against criticism and the power of the critic can only be taken seriously if the one complaining wails against both good and bad reviews, and this is seldom the case.

Rising ticket prices, often put forth as the major problem facing Broadway, is a contributing factor to the critic's power. In 1973, the average price for an orchestra seat at a Broadway play was about $9. In 1980, that had risen to about $30. By 1993, late in Rich's tenure, it was $65 and on the way up, not including such attendant fees as parking, dining, baby-sitting. Demographic shifts, with theatregoers moving to the suburbs, have, along with higher ticket prices, helped change theatregoing from a casual into a major event. The popularity of film and television has also helped lead to the loss of a mass, general theatregoing public, with people going to the movies the way they once went to plays. With those factors—high ticket prices, cheaper, more accessible alternatives—prospective audience members want to know ahead of time that they are getting their money's worth. So they turn to their consumer guide—the *Times*'s daily critic, whether he likes it or not—and then go to see what he has sanctioned as a good buy. They do not take a $65 chance on making up their own minds.

Rising costs have not been limited to the ticket buyer. Production costs also have gone up astronomically, and the producer has proved just as squeamish as the audience that he is courting. There is less and less tolerance for failure and so fewer and fewer chances are taken with shows. Producers who once might have taken a $50,000 risk on an offbeat show will not take a $5 million chance. They want a proven product, and the closest thing to a guarantee is—what the critics like. This enhances the critic's power *a priori*, giving him some control not only over what runs but also over what is produced to begin with, and amounts to something like self-censorship on the part of producers. If reviews for a show are bad, producers rarely are willing to spend the $200,000 or $300,000 necessary to keep a Broadway play going each week while they build an audience through word-of-mouth. They close the show on the basis of the reviews, and thus enhance the critic's clout yet again. The economics have become so outlandish, it is not infrequent for a show that gets favorable reviews not to be able to stay alive long enough to build an audience. And this hit-or-miss mentality—deplored by, yet contributed to by all parties—encourages writing hit-or-miss reviews, which, in turn, enhances the critic's clout.

The *New York Times* has become a national newspaper. It goes out to much of the country and considers itself in competition with other national newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and such national news magazines as *Time* and *Newsweek*. People in any state who are interested in theatre read the *Times*. The shows that succeed in New York generally are the shows that go out and have a sustained life in other parts of the country, and shows developed elsewhere are more likely to be produced in New York if the *Times*'s reviewer sees and likes them in their early stages. A good *Times*

review for a show that originated off or off off Broadway can help that show make the move to a longer, Broadway run. Shows in London, too, are much more likely to make the jump to Broadway after a good review from the *Times*. The shows that Rich liked on his annual trips to London emerged as likely candidates for transfer.

David Hare's *Secret Rapture* illustrates the situation. The producers might have thought they had something akin to a sure thing after Rich spoke highly of the play when he saw it in London. Something of that feeling comes across in Hare's letter to Rich and in the mountain of words heaped up during the fallout. The feeling is that Rich had somehow cheated by holding out the prospect of success and then vindictively snatching it away again. We get the idea that the creators of *Secret Rapture* were following the rules of the game, but Rich reneged on those rules, even though he had been instrumental in establishing them.

(There is a less-discussed footnote to the power issue and *Secret Rapture*. Joseph Papp had originally intended to run the play five and one half weeks at the Public before taking it to Broadway. The *Times*'s editors wanted to review the play while it was at the Public, arguing that five and one-half weeks was long enough to take the run outside preview status and open it to critiquing. Papp said that was his decision to make and when no compromise could be reached, he canceled the planned run at the Public and took the play directly to Broadway. So Papp's concern over the *Times*'s review caused him to, as one headline put it, "plan a production around a review."[1])

Other plays didn't make the move to Broadway because of a Rich review. Christopher Durang said that Papp had planned to move Durang's *The*

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[1]Leida Snow, "*The New York Times*: Protection of the Public or Abuse of Power?: Joseph Papp Plans a Production Around a Review," *Theater Week*, 11 September 1989, 36.

Marriage of Bette and Boo but changed his mind after Rich wrote unfavorably about it. Durang also said he gave up on the theatre and moved to the country for two years because of Rich's treatment of *Bette and Boo*.[2] He is just one of several theatre artists who say they made drastic career decisions because of Rich's unfavorable reviews. Andrei Serban supposedly wrote Rich a letter at one point saying that he no longer felt he could work in *New York*.[3] (These stories are not peculiar to Rich. Paddy Chayevsky and William Goldman, among others, are supposed to have quit writing plays because of bad reviews from other critics.)

Of course it's not just plays that don't move to Broadway that suffer the critics. The more visible problem is the play that closes after a negative review. James Duff wrote a play called *Home Front*, which got good reviews in London, played to sold-out houses, and then moved to Broadway, where, again, it got generally good, even some rave, reviews. Except for Frank Rich's. Duff remembered the review well:

> I read the first paragraph and it was O.K. and the second paragraph and I knew . . . and I looked at them . . . and I said, "Well, sorry guys." That's what I said. "Sorry. It doesn't look like we'll be able to do it" . . . and everybody understood that. You know . . . The *New York Times* goes against you, and you don't run.[4]

"Sorry, guys." Those, or words like those, were heard over and over during Rich's tenure. But the influential arm of the *New York Times* reaches beyond simply helping determine a play's life or death through reviews, powerful though that may be. It winds through the world of theatre in other ways

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[2]Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," 20.

[3]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 174.

[4]Quoted in Booth, *Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 29. Review of *Home Front*, 3 January 1985, C13:1.

as well. In John Booth's study on the critic and the performing arts, artists and producers over and over again raise the question of the effect of reviews on funding. Many say that favorable reviews are of prime importance in stimulating grants from foundations and corporations.[5] This not only applies to single seasons, but favorable critical response also helps create a climate for continued growth. The *Times* then not only has its effect on Broadway theatres but on non-profit ones as well.

In his article "The Frank Rich Legacy," Michael Goldstein saw an even more invasive effect. When the Public Theatre was looking for a replacement for the fired JoAnne Akalaitis, it turned to George Wolfe, a director and writer consistently praised by Rich. The Public, and its grantors, knew Rich liked Wolfe, wrote Goldstein, and that might have been influential.[6]

Regardless of any part that Rich's influence might have played in the hiring of Wolfe, Akalaitis's firing had already been seen in some quarters as evidence of the *Times*'s excessive power. Robert Brustein, a longtime critic of the paper's power, wrote, "It does not take a conspiracy theorist to conclude that some role was played in this affair by the *Times*, which had conducted an unrelenting campaign against Akalaitis ever since her appointment was announced."[7]

This article, "Akalaitis Axed," followed by a year Brustein's more notorious blast, "An Embarrassment of Riches." Here, Brustein's main contention was that there was a consolidation of power at the *Times* that was destructive to theatre. He was referring to what he called the "one-two punch" of

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[5]Booth, *Critic, Power, and the Performing Arts*, 33.

[6]Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," 18.

[7]Brustein, "Akalaitis Axed," 29.

Rich and his wife, Alex Witchel, who, in her "On Stage, and Off" column, routinely agreed with Rich on the merits or demerits of a play or writer. It was the first time in memory, Brustein wrote, that features regularly were written to endorse the critic's negative review, and this was pushing the *Times* over the line between judging theatre and controlling it.[8]

Brustein also intimated that the *Times*, despite its disclaimers, is actually working to consolidate its power, an idea that at least some theatre professionals share. They say that a production or an artist praised by Rich frequently received one or more follow-ups in the *Times*, while a play that he didn't like seemed to disappear without a trace. Goldstein wrote that every press agent he asked confirmed the idea of an unwritten *Times* policy of no feature stories on plays that Rich didn't like.[9] Harold Prince saw the same problem:

> It seems to me the *Times* is conflicted. It protests that it doesn't want to turn thumbs up or down on a production. Yet when its critic likes a show that few others have liked, it schedules interviews and promotes the show—often to hit status. When it's time for the annual Tony awards, the *Times* places special features on the people it would like to win those awards. Is that because its heart is in the right place? Possibly. But it's also possible that it doesn't want to be wrong, that it wants to define what succeeds and what fails.[10]

The newspaper industry itself gives away power to the *Times*. One press agent said that if Rich panned a play, other newspapers treated it as a flop even if their own reviewer liked it: "If you try to get an article placed in the paper, the editors will say 'It didn't get a good review.' "[11]

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[8]Brustein, "An Embarrassment of Riches," 28.

[9]Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," 15.

[10]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 146.

[11]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 176.

Goldstein also argued that second-night critics, those from smaller, out of town publications, followed Rich's lead. According to Goldstein, the up-and-coming critics didn't want to contradict Rich and appear unknowledgeable, both to their editors and their readers. The second-nighter can be affected in other ways. Goldstein said that often, actors would have read Rich's negative review by the second-night, would know that, basically, they were already out of work, and so would give flat performances. Even if the actors didn't succumb to this, the second-night audience, which also had read the review, was not happy and wouldn't like much of what it saw anyway.[12] While this is an abysmal view of actors and audience members alike, certainly knowing of a negative review beforehand can have some effect, if not so drastic a one as Goldstein suggested.

While some people cry out against what they see as the *Times*'s efforts to consolidate its power, other theatre professionals accept it as a given, if an unwelcome one. They see Rich as someone who simply inherited a mantle worn by other *Times*'s critics before him. It was not so much Rich's power that infuriated them, as his attitude toward it.

Rich's standard reply to charges of excessive power—and it is hardly ever written about without being labeled "disingenuous"—was that critics don't close plays, producers do. He acknowledged that he had some power but always insisted that it was overstated, and that it was the paper's anyway, that he had indeed simply inherited a mantle. He pointed back to Kerr, to Atkinson, even to Woollcott, all of whom had been attacked for wielding excessive power, and for wielding it unwisely, capriciously, and vindictively.

Rich said:

The power thing historically has always been said about *The New York*

[12]Goldstein, "The Frank Rich Legacy," 14.

> *Times*. I'm working on a book about the history of the theater, and I've learned that whoever the *Times*' critic has been, there always has been this mythology. There's nothing that the critic in the job can do about it. I try just to forget about it when I'm writing, because if you start thinking about it you become paralyzed. You have to keep the reader in mind and all you can do is: be honest. If you start saying, "Well, the *Times* has all this power, I better not say what I really think, because I don't want to upset people, or the show might close," then you are engaged in self-censorship, which ultimately defeats you as a responsible critic.[13]

In addition to taking the power off himself and placing it onto the *Times*, Rich blamed economics and the commercialization of America. "The fact is that people don't buy a toaster without reading a review of it, or cars, or books, or anything," he said. "So theater, sadly, is not able to escape this. It's the whole mercantile ethic of this country."[14] The critic's ability to influence box office also is related to the increase in ticket prices. "Why is it John O'Connor's TV reviews in the *Times* have no effect on ratings? It's not because he's not a good critic, it's because television is free," said Rich.[15]

Rich's belief in the journalistic function of criticism allowed him to further disassociate himself from the effects of his reviews. He repeatedly said that he was not part of the business of theatre and that it was not his job to worry about how much money a play made or how long it ran. Having had "incredibly sophisticated" readers gave him another line of defense. Those readers do not slavishly follow the *Times*'s critic regardless of what he writes: "They're tough and they know what they like, and you cannot impose your taste on people who are intelligent and have always been."[16] Rich turned one argument on its head

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[13]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 21.

[14]*Ibid.*, 85.

[15]Rich, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[16]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 62.

and said that reviews are not as important today as they were several decades ago:

> The reviews clearly matter much less than they used to. When there were seven or eight newspapers and everyone had a different critic they liked and people read newspapers universally, clearly the review was a much more important part of it. People now are less likely to read newspapers, including people who go to the theatre, and they pick up the review on the fly or maybe from television or quote ads. . . . You'd be shocked if you ask [how many people going to a play have read the review].[17]

Rich also said that the fate of many shows, particularly the British megamusicals, is not subject to the review. Not one of the thousands of people each week paying $65 to see *The Phantom of the Opera* remembers that Rich chided Sarah Brightman for her "chipmunk cheeks," and no one waiting to see *Cats* remembers, thirteen years after the fact, that Rich, along with most other critics, disliked the show. The success of serious plays on Broadway is also not closely linked to reviews, he said, but for another reason: They rarely make back their investments even when they get good reviews.

Many would argue with Rich's assessment of what was outside his power to affect. They would say that it was the serious play in off Broadway venues, as well as on Broadway, that suffered most under Rich. The very heart of serious theatre was "almost entirely subject to his tastes," Brustein has said.[18]

Rich pointed out that most big hits—apart from the Lloyd Webber musicals—received near unanimous good reviews, while the biggest bombs—*Nick and Nora, Carrie*—were panned by almost everyone. He ticked off a list of shows that he commended that were not successful commercially—*Grown Ups, Eastern Standard, Four Baboons Adoring the Sun,*

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[17]Rich, interview with the author.

[18]Brustein, "An Embarrassment of Riches," 28.

A Lie of the Mind, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, the revival of *The Iceman Cometh.* And he listed shows—*The Foreigner, Agnes of God, Blood Brothers, I'm Not Rappaport, A Few Good Men*—that succeeded despite his disfavor, primarily, he said, because of the producers' willingness to work hard, promote their shows, and rely on word-of-mouth taking over. He admitted that the *Times*'s power can help encourage extended runs of off Broadway plays and plays outside *New York*, and that it can help encourage the transfer of those plays to commercial theatres. He also admitted—and admitted that he enjoyed—the power when it could help keep running a *Dreamgirls* or a *Sunday in the Park with George*, shows that he liked but many other critics didn't. Another of Rich's often-heard defenses was that, while the theatre world found him too tough, his readers and editors were far more likely to find him too easy. Most of his mail, he said, was from people who thought he was too lenient with a show.

Rich also said that the *Times*'s influence is the very reason that he had to give his honest opinion—even if it were negative. What, he asked, was the alternative? To write "waffling reviews, imploring readers to go to some well-meaning mediocrity for the good of the theater and those who worked in it?"[19] To do so, said Rich, would have cost him his credibility, and rightly so, for who then would have believed him when he praised the truly outstanding play?

Producers, artists, even other critics, have thrown out various options for curtailing the power, and Rich and his editors have batted them all away. The main solution proposed by the industry is to have each play reviewed by two daily critics. The *Times* counters by saying that would be unrealistic in terms of space and cost, and that it is not a policy followed in any other area; there are not two reviews of novels or dance events, not two editorials about the mayor's race. Besides, the two critics probably would agree most of the time anyway,

[19]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 53.

and then a negative review would be doubly disastrous. Other suggestions have included: Print a brief summary of reviews from other publications. (People can simply buy those other publications, says the *Times*.) Offer artists some sort of redress after a negative review. (They can write letters or buy advertising space.) Have follow-up stories on plays that are panned as well as those that are praised. (The *Times* does not admit that this is a problem.)

There we have a brief overview of the debate over the power of Frank Rich and the *New York Times*. It is power that affects not only New York but also the entire world of theatre. This background is necessary in trying to determine Frank Rich's contributions to American dramatic criticism. The question before this dissertation is not whether Rich, or any *Times* critic, has had some power over the theatre. Yes, he has. Neither can the question be to determine exactly how much power, which probably is unanswerable.

The questions we can pursue are: Was Frank Rich, in fact, changing the nature of criticism itself? If so, what part did the power play? What mark did he leave on theatre and criticism? Those are the questions we turn to now.

"IMPORTANT" THEATRE

Frank Rich was acutely aware of the power he had. He wanted to influence theatre and to shape tastes and he knew he had the platform to do it. Rich "spent" himself on certain reviews. He was whipping *New York Times* readers into a froth with his reviews of such plays as *Six Degrees of Separation, Falsettos, Angels in America*. He was not just saying there is a difference in *degree* in these plays, but a difference in *kind*. He was saying this is what theatre is all about, this is what you should be interested in, these are

not just good or bad plays, these are *important* plays.

The importance and relevance of theatre—and criticism—had long been on Rich's mind. He was a freshman at Harvard when Pauline Kael wrote her seminal review of *Bonnie and Clyde* in October 1967. Rich remembers it as helping bring about a sea change in criticism. The long-held belief had been that only "serious" plays and films, only highbrow art, were worthy of serious consideration. Kael, Arlene Croce in dance, and others like them changed that. They rescued criticism from a dreary middle-browism that said that mainstream theatre, mainstream Hollywood, that American popular culture in its entirety, were inimical with "art." They said that a film about two backwater thieves or a dance by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers could be as culturally important as the icons of film or classical ballet. The idea helped revolutionize and elevate cultural criticism. Rich's views—as well as those of a whole generation of critics—were shaped by this new attitude. Theatre, even commercial theatre, could be more than simply good or bad; it could be important. When Rich was a film critic for the *New York Post* in the 1970s, he had talked about another side of the issue. The temptation, he wrote, is to find good where there is none because that makes the critic's work more important. "With flop after flop, it's hard to maintain that illusion."[20] Even when he landed in the most prestigious seat in the country for a theatre critic, the best job in the world for a Frank Rich, something was wrong. ". . . I couldn't shake the sense that my calling was a bit arcane, that I had arrived at my dream job after the dream had ended," Rich wrote in "Exit."[21] Theatre would never again be what it had been, or had seemed, to the youngster reared—physically—in the 1950s and 1960s and

[20] Frank Rich, "A Hard Review Is Hard to Write," *New York Post*, 19 June 1976, 40.

[21] Rich, "Exit the Critic," 36.

reared—figuratively—on all of Broadway's history. The corrosive effects of high ticket prices, exorbitant production costs, changing demographics, and the defection of stars and audience alike to that pervasive cousin, film, had whittled away at theatre's stature, at the spell it could weave, and at those it could weave it over. What was Rich to do now that he was *Times* critic to "maintain the illusion"? He would do all that he could including refining a style of reviewing that: 1. linked theatre to the world, 2. increased the status of the theatrical arts by repeatedly extolling certain artists, 3. made his review definitive and necessary as the capstone of approval, 4. targeted certain plays—and their reviews—to show that theatre—and criticism—are indeed important, and, 5. said that, of those plays, the most important deal with liberal social issues.

THEATRE AND LIFE

Stanley Kauffmann once said:

> If criticism is worthwhile, it not only doesn't seal off that play from you and tie it up and put it on a shelf, it opens the play afresh for you. It makes what is pertinent about the play and critics' comments live for you. And further, if the criticism is of value, by extension it applies sooner or later, subtly or openly, consciously or unconsciously, to life. That's something of a credo to a critic. We don't achieve it often . . . but it's something to believe in.[22]

The heart of Rich's criticism was in comparing theatre to life. Rich said,

> You can know everything about art and the theater, but if you don't know anything about the world then you exist in a vacuum. . . . You have to compare things from the theater not only to things from the theater, life also has to enter. You have to understand life, because it's part of the equation—who you are.[23]

Rich liked best those plays that make that connection. In some, this link to the

[22]Kauffmann, "Critics on Criticism," tape 2.

[23]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 53-54.

real world is inherent in the subject matter—*Mad Forest, Falsettos, Six Degrees of Separation, Angels in America*—and Rich, as much essayist as critic then, was happiest when drawing parallels between the world of the play and his own world. If plays have something to say about life then they are important beyond the insular, darkened world in which they take place. Criticism tied to these plays—important plays, plays that touch the world—is criticism worth listening to.

In her article "Finally Free of Frank," Mimi Kramer said that Rich changed the style of reviewing to reflect *Times* journalism in general; it was first and foremost an informative and informed style, "one that told you not only who was doing what and how but also what they had done before."[24] If a play or musical was adapted from a book, Rich knew that book better than the adaptor did; if the characters within a play mentioned a book, Rich knew *that* book better than the characters did; if an actor in a certain play had been in a film, Rich knew the film; if an author had written more than one play, Rich saw what connected them. Under Rich, *A Lie of the Mind* was not just a play; it was "the unmistakable expression of a major writer nearing the height of his powers." It featured signature scenes, virtuosic sequences, quintessential good brother-bad brother Shepard alter egos; it echoed through Shepard's other works, it even "ricochet[ed] through American dramatic literature." Shepard—and Rich—were not just dealing with plot and character; they were dealing with tribal codes, eternal family scenarios, mythic stories, ritualistic re-enactments, primordial magnetic poles, the saving possibilities of love, cultural mythos, metaphysics of the mind, biological identities of the sexes, man's timeless destiny, archetypal

[24]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 49.

genetic fates we all share, and the urge for salvation. All that in one review.[25] In relating theatre to the world, in relating themes running through an artist's work, in relating those themes to universal truths, Rich was putting forward those theatre artists that he wanted recognized. He often seemed to be, as one writer put it, on duty ferreting out his geniuses of the year.[26] The effect of all this was to make the theatrical arts more important than . . . well, than simply theatrical arts. As Kramer said, under Rich, Michael Bennett was no longer just a dancer and a choreographer who did good work, he was a genius and a force.[27] Sam Shepard was not just an able playwright, he was a major American writer, worthy of comparison to Twain, Dreiser and O'Neill. Stephen Sondheim was not just a tunesmith but a self-revealing, misunderstood genius giving an unworthy world glimpses of musical theatre "yet to come."[28] And Rich was not just a guy recreating an evening of theatre for his readers. He, too, was a force. A guy discovering "archetypal genetic fates we all share" is not the same as a guy noticing that Act II is too long. By ferreting out geniuses and saying so, Rich began to not simply tell about plays, but also to affect what was going to happen in theatre. He was more prescriptive, more of a kingmaker than any critic who had come before, anointing certain people who could help shape theatre into the image he wanted.

THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY

George Jean Nathan said that the critic must be like a doctor, cajoling his

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[25]Review of *A Lie of the Mind*, 6 December 1985, C3:1.

[26]Berman, "Is Theater Criticism Dead," 28.

[27]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 49.

[28]Review of *Sunday in the Park With George*, 3 May 1984, C21:1.

patients—the readers—into accepting what he says with a "critical bedside manner" that masks knowledge in humor and modesty.[29] This was not for Rich. He had traded in the gentleman critic's quips and witticisms, humor and modesty, for this informative writing that linked plays and artists to the world at large. In setting aside the fellow who tells you what he thinks, Rich replaced him with the voice of authority who tells you what is what. The gulf that Rich jumped over was not so wide as Kramer had painted when she skipped all the way back to contrast Rich with Brooks Atkinson. Earlier critics had begun to move away from Atkinson's earnest—some would say dull—gentlemanly tone. Atkinson was of the Goethe school—telling what the play is about, what the author's intention is, and how well he succeeds—and he had a strong sense of responsibility toward theatre, but he was not an especially penetrating writer and was considered a bit mild, a bit detached even during his time. His style was the *Times*'s style, and critics for other newspapers were even then writing about plays in different ways. There was more of the vernacular, more high energy, more "I loved it, I hated it." Still, in part because of the larger number of reviewers, what the reader got—and he knew it—was one man's opinion. Clive Barnes championed the use of the first person, previously frowned upon, at the *Times*. But while this may have contributed to a "this is a hit, run don't walk" style, it did not make even Barnes an absolutely authoritative voice. In fact, Barnes has said that he used the first person for the opposite reason, to accentuate the subjective nature of reviewing and show that his was, in fact, one man's opinion. Rich did not set himself apart and qualify his opinions with an "I think" or "it seems to me," nor did he group himself with his readers, as his successor David Richards did, with such phrases as "few would doubt. . ." or

[29]Frick, *George Jean Nathan*, 126.

"you are apt to. . . ."[30] Outside a few of his very earliest reviews, there was nothing in Rich that said, "I believe," or "This is what I think." Even when he did use a similar expression, it was not to be taken at its word; rather, it conveyed the exact opposite impression, that what he thought was not opinion, but fact ("I didn't laugh but maybe that's my problem."[31]) Here is Rich early in his career in a season wrap-up story prior to the Tony presentations: "In any case, here is a highly opinionated, far from all-inclusive list of some of the people, plays and things that made this theatregoers's 1979-80 season worthwhile."[32] Here is Rich, still early, in a pre-Tony article lauding the best plays off and off off Broadway: "What follows is one theatergoer's selective, far from all-inclusive, remembrance of the noteworthy people, plays and things from that season—none of which will be mentioned during the Tony telecast."[33] We do not find Rich writing that way—as "one theatergoer" with a "highly opinionated" viewpoint—even a few years later. He soon became entrenched on the throne. He had no need to cajole or win the reader over either by being affable or humble, or even by arguing his case, and could be dismissive of the audience's opinion when it differed from his own. He ceased, in effect, to be offering opinions; he was making pronouncements to a readership that had more and more abdicated its own opinion-forming prerogatives.

With this authoritative voice came a blurring between what was "good" and what was accepted by Rich. The thinking came to be: Rich did not like this, therefore it will not run (the few examples to the contrary doing nothing to

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[30]Richards's propensity for this is pointed out in London, "New Order at the *Times*," 91.

[31]Review of *Welcome to the Club*, 14 April 1989, C3:1. Rich's pan of this Cy Coleman musical leaves little doubt as to whose he thought the real problem was.

[32]Frank Rich, "Selected Highlights of the Season," *New York Times*, 8 June 1980, II:3:5.

[33]Frank Rich, "High Points Off Broadway," *New York Times*, 31 May 1981, II:1:4.

change that view). An artist wants his work to be well-received, wants it to be financially successful, wants it to be seen by people—in short, wants it to run. If it does not run, it must not have been good. Rich was right. And in a hazy blurring of values, it was not good *because* it did not run. To protest, to say that a work still was good even though Rich did not like it, came to seem like dissembling.

A recent dissertation says that American dramatic criticism is overrun with "performing critics" who are "re-creating themselves as dramatic characters in the prose of their reviews."[34] This is what Rich did. His reviews were self-dramatizing and he made himself into one of the most important characters—if behind the scenes—in the long-running, often foundering "Theatre of Theatre." We had to know *someone* was back there, writing that lushly, being that insightful, making those connections, dealing with pain and loss, critiquing society, influencing theatre and us. Michael Kirby points out that the beauty or value of a work is in the one who perceives, not in that which is perceived, and thus the critic making judgments is really telling us about himself much more than he is telling us about the work critiqued.[35] Rich defined himself through his reviews and through his tenure. By putting forward plays that were not just good or bad, but important theatre, by anointing certain artists as "forces," he was shaping the theatre. And the shape it began to assume at its center—though inconsistent, rough, and unruly—looked curiously like Frank Rich. His criticism was, to quote from Oscar Wilde, "the record of his own soul."[36]

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[34]Lise Papetti Esch, "An Audience in Our Own Image: Subjective Styles in American Theatre Criticism Between the Wars," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1993.

[35]Kirby, "Criticism: Four Faults," 62.

[36]"The Critic as Artist," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Random House, 1968).

As the voice of authority, as the character behind the scenes, as the champion of theatre's links to the world, Rich told us what was important in a play. His review became definitive. It not only was the last word, it was an additional word about the play. The "act" of theatre under Rich—and because of the economics—became as much a four-pronged as a three-pronged event: The play was created, it was performed, it was watched, *and* it was reviewed. This was true for the reader and the industry professional, both of whom, in their separate ways, depended heavily on the review, and this final step in the process—the review—was more required than it ever had been. A review "fixes" the play in a readership's mind, just as a photograph is chemically fixed before leaving the darkroom. It even helps "fix" the play for those who don't read the review, by contributing to the play's success or demise, by helping lead to subsequent productions or no subsequent productions, by establishing it in memory as a hit, or a flop, or a play not to be remembered at all. In all these ways, people come to "know" a play through the review.

Other factors contributed to the importance of a Rich review. The hit-or-flop style of reviewing has more than the immediate effect of helping close plays; by designating what was worthy of running, Rich's reviews also helped designate what might be worthy of later dramatic criticism. The entertaining, lethal pan also could make the review more important. A reader comes to expect and enjoy a play's execution. The cumulative effect can lead to an enjoyment of criticism but a negative attitude toward theatre. Also, a review's effect on a particular theatre company's ability to obtain grants and other support may well increase the influence of a review beyond the lifetime of a particular play.

RICH THE WRITER

Stanley Kauffmann has said that every good critic wishes he could be a good artist.[37] Here is another key to understanding Frank Rich the critic. This is not to say that Rich was a failed artist, bitter about his own inadequacies and taking this out on the world of theatre, but rather that Rich was, first and foremost, a writer. As a writer, Rich was looking to attract a regular readership, and he succeeded brilliantly. Frank Rich was bankable, a "critic-star" as someone put it. His review was necessary reading, almost independent of the plays. Like any writer Rich longed to write that which would be worthwhile, that which would soar above the average and stand the test of time. Like any writer he knew that all his work did not do this. That was acceptable; he would do what he must, write minor reviews of minor works much of the time, while all the while his sights were set on that approaching masterwork.

Rich put up with bad, mediocre, even good plays in order to experience, on rare occasions, the great play. But Rich, the writer, was not waiting only for the great play to "spend" himself on but also for the great review. He waited, he persisted, he sometimes found what he was waiting for, and he created something of his own from it. These plays were chosen because of the very personal chord they touched in Rich and because of what they allowed him to say in his review. This is not to say the merits of the play were irrelevant; in many instances, it was the best plays that most affected Rich. But there was a shift, from the absolute importance of the play to the importance of the review, from the playwright doing what he does best to the critic doing what he does best. The relationship was symbiotic: An outstanding review added cachet to the play and could help turn it from good theatre into important theatre, as well. In turn, the important play made the review important.

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[37]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 52.

It is these reviews then, the 40 or so that Rich spent himself on, that best define Frank Rich the critic. (I am not here merely showing the ingredients of the typical Rich review—if he used analysis more than impression, if he liked most comedies. For that, all his reviews must be calculated. But because Rich was, in part, persevering through those reviews for the sake of the special ones, he is best defined, not by 1,100 reviews, but by those 40 or so that he spent himself on.)

Rich's authoritative voice was largely a voice of dismissal, of a man toiling away, seeing much, sifting through it, saying, "Not that one. Not that one. Not that one," until he found his keepers. They were keepers because he said so, and they were keepers because they were specifically Richian.

To return to the Stanley Kauffmann quote:

> I think that I write best about the plays, or books, or films that I wish most I could have done. . . . Beckett, Pinter, the best of Sam Shepard—I write about them fairly well. In films, I think about people like Antonioni, Bergman, Kurosawa. If I had that talent, those are the kinds of films I'd like to make. There's much connection between good criticism and what you might call admiring jealousy or jealous admiration.[38]

Rich wrote best about the plays he would have written. As Mimi Kramer wrote, the key to Rich's approach was to "dramatize himself and the times he was living in and to write lushly about plays that did the same."[39] The key to those 40 or so defining reviews was Rich's ability to link the plays to the world, to say cosmic things about cosmic issues, or at least issues important in Rich's cosmos, for these were intensely personal issues and reviews defining Rich.

His detractors may scoff at the comparison, but in a limited way what Rich was doing put him in the same camp with Shaw. Shaw saw theatre as a

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[38]Stefanova-Peteva, *Who Calls the Shots?*, 52.

[39]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 48.

battleground where the war over social ills could best be fought. He said that plays could be important, that problem plays, plays unpleasant, plays dealing with social concerns could be at the forefront of turning society and the world upside down. Rich agreed; certain plays and their reviews could help shape theatre and maybe even society at large. What shape did Rich want to see emerging? The answer is not surprising for the student who protested the Vietnam War and marched with Martin Luther King Jr. or for the young man who started one political journal and worked for another: Rich was working for a socially and politically liberal theatre to put its imprint on the world. The theatre was a perfect vehicle when it cooperated, (which, ultimately, was not often enough). It already was on his side, willing to turn out its share of plays on liberal social themes, and certainly much of what followed Rich's dictates to look beyond the world of the theatre to life leaned in that direction. As Robert Brustein wrote in "Reinventing American Theater": "The new American play . . . has virtually disappeared from producers' agendas, unless it can be marketed as a variant of affirmative action, alleviating liberal guilt toward minorities or the handicapped."[40] But Rich had a flaw—he was not easy or compromising; he wanted plays to be good as well, to be inventive and theatrical and to involve the mind and senses. While he could be lenient on marginal efforts that addressed his preferred themes, he could soar only on *Angels*, on *Falsettos*, on *Eastern Standard*. (Of course, Rich did not like only plays on liberal social or political issues. He was too much a man of the theatre for that and saw value in other well-written works, from the farce of *Noises Off* to Greek tragedy. But these were not the plays that could give the theatre of his time a claim to importance.)

[40]Robert Brustein, "Reinventing American Theater," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 91, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 246.

Ultimately, Rich was frustrated both as a writer and as a man with definite hopes for the theatre. He was dependent on the plays that others wrote and could soar only when a playwright took him aloft. Because those plays that he could spend himself on didn't come along often enough or because the theatre hadn't moved where he wanted it fast enough or thoroughly enough, he was limited in what he could do. At times he must have felt as if he were, indeed, the Emperor of Ashes. And so he left the critic's chair, where he was the biggest of fish but still in a relatively small pond, and he moved to the Op-Ed page, from where, as he put it: "I have the whole world to look at."[41]

RICH'S LEGACY

Frank Rich put his stamp on the theatre. What it should turn out, he said—and he left having written it across the wall of every theatre—are highly theatrical, highly personal plays, and the best of these will deal with the times in which we are living. That should be the backbone of theatre, with room enough for musicals, farces, and other plays around the edges. Plays on homosexual themes have been the biggest beneficiaries. The advent of AIDS plays and the move into the mainstream of plays with homosexual characters is the largest single change marking Rich's tenure, and much of the responsibility for that goes to him.

And criticism? Where has it come? Publicly, Rich said that criticism is a conversation between the critic and the reader. But his style acknowledged that it is more than that; that it is a way of saying what is important and of edging theatre and the world in that direction. It is not simply a vehicle for the critic to be witty about why he liked or did not like something, nor for him to be a

[41]Gerard, "Rich Ankles Aisle," 193.

cheerleader for theatre, nor a chronicler for posterity. The world did not need that, and writers like Rich would not settle for that.

Mimi Kramer says that, since Rich has stopped reviewing, when she opens the paper she feels a blast of relief—like a salt breeze.[42] I do not think so. I believe the wind is still blowing the way Rich left it. His way of looking at plays with an informative, essayist style has taken root. More writers have adopted that style but are using it on lesser plays that don't hold up under the weight of such analysis. The result can be a turgid and dense review that before might have at least been cheeky and entertaining, even if the play were not. (George Jean Nathan had pointed out seventy years ago that criticism suffers from reporting on every play. Most of them are bad, and the critic is left either constantly disparaging theatre or else trying to force out something valuable to say when nothing is there.[43]) Rich also gave the stamp of approval to writing the supercilious, scathing review that destroys a work, instead of simply being cheeky. For, if plays are important, then bad plays are enemies. Many people see part of a critic's function as developing readers who will demand more than just consumer advice. Rich may have hoped he was doing this, but the circumstances of the times and his hit-or-miss style probably did the opposite. Readers who went to the theatre fell more and more into the habit of turning to Rich to know what to see and what to leave alone, and readers who were not theatregoers relied even more on him for what was "good" and what was "bad." He was not so much educating tastes, as molding them. Keeping people away from theatre did it no real service in the long run. He probably would have been better off throwing open the floodgates and saying, "See it all

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[42]Kramer, "Finally Free of Frank," 50.

[43]Frick, *George Jean Nathan*, 98-99.

if you have the time and the money, but you should know it's my opinion that this and this and this are bad." But the economics and his authoritative voice wouldn't allow for that. And so he developed a newspaper readership, but not a theatre audience.

Rich's view of the critic-as-journalist was self-limiting. It did not allow him to side with theatre—not to push off mediocre shows onto audiences; no one who cares about the good of theatre wants that. But he wasn't able to press for great things for the theatre. He would set aside his journalistic role to press for what concerned him, to champion certain plays and writers, but not to champion theatre as a whole. For thirteen years, he was among theatre's strongest "players"; but he was never its greatest advocate.

For all his intelligence and his commitment to his times, Rich did not come across as deeply philosophical about theatre; his was more of a pop philosophy than a transcending one. You might know what "a Rich show" was, but for all that you could not have said what encompassing, illuminating philosophy, what time-weathered doctrine—can we say, what genuine aesthetic?—lay behind him. And theatre must surely benefit whenever a critic in Rich's pivotal position has such a philosophy, even if he never writes books or treatises on it, even if he never articulates it openly in his reviews.

CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSION

Frank Rich has said that he did not adhere to one all-purpose theory of theatre as chief drama critic for the *Times*, and an examination of his reviews confirms that. At least, Rich held to none of the traditional theories. He did not demand that a play follow the unities; he did not demand that it supply catharsis; that it "profit and please"; that it involve a struggle of the will; that it realistically represent life on stage; he did not even demand a plot and characters from all plays.

We can, however, discern certain general principles that Rich believed make for the best theatre. An effort to sum up one over-arching theory for Rich might yield this: The best theatre makes use of every facet to create a "total" sense of theatre that speaks at a level so deep the spirit responds before the mind. The most assured way of accomplishing this is to connect the play's themes to what is happening in the real world, and metaphorically, to that which is eternal and universal. The route to this goal is open, though generally it is best arrived at through works that defy naturalism and literal-minded plot explications, that use metaphor or myth to transcend the literal, that involve the mind, the senses, and the feelings, that combine craftsmanship and dramatic imagination, that invoke and carry out a coherent vision that finds common ground with the text, and that find drama in the "spaces." Though artists of any age can produce this kind of theatre, it is more exciting to find in modern writers, primarily because they can make connections with current, vibrant life outside the walls of today's theatre in a way that their predecessors can not.

Rich's views on how to achieve this kind of effective, transporting theatre

were largely conventional. In evaluating a new play, Rich looked first at the writing. Directing and acting received the most attention in revivals and the classics. Rich was astute and gracious in assessing design in new plays or revivals.

Rich did not like formulaic, assembly-line plays, but he was even more critical of poorly crafted plays beset by structural flaws. Rich praised writing technique in comedy and farce more than elsewhere, but even there he considered craftsmanship secondary to the dramatic imagination. Unlike some other critics, Rich did not focus on plot. He pared any description down to one or two sentences and usually intertwined those with larger points he was making about the writer, director, or actors. He was skilled enough at this so that the reader didn't feel confused or shortchanged.

Rich believed that the best writers—Shepard, Mamet, August Wilson, Foote—go beyond sound structure and plot to find drama in the spaces, drama beyond the realm of everyday existence. They often make use of a poetic, heightened language. The best writing also is often metaphorical. Metaphor allows a play to seep beyond its specific time and place to illuminate universal, eternal issues. But the metaphor must be integral; Rich criticized playwrights for tacking on irrelevant metaphor or "milking" their work for metaphor that was not really there, often in the hope of camouflaging a play's flaws.

Rich wanted writers to delve into their characters' emotions and to advance the story by showing their growth and development rather than through contrived plot devices. He insisted that the writer neither sentimentalize, nor vilify, nor caricature his characters; they should have lives of their own, and not be artificially jammed into a writer's preconceived themes.

Rich demanded honesty of dialogue and reserved some of his most

caustic criticism for polemic, didactic writing. Plays lose their power when writers pontificate, draw their characters, themes, and arguments in black and white, and put forth glib, ready-made remedies, and nowhere is this more true than in political writing. A playwright must not forget his medium; to be effective he must not only speak subtly, he must also speak in theatrical terms, dramatizing rather than announcing his every point. A play must also have something new or substantial to say about its subject, not simply pay lip service to an issue. Too often, plays expect extra credit simply because they are about "serious" issues. Rich was particularly hard on plays that trivialize or oversimplify a sensitive subject, or treat it as melodrama. Neither did he countenance plays that needlessly make much ado about warmed over or patently unobjectionable truths.

Rich believed that the best theatre is "total" or "pure" theatre; it engages the mind, the senses, and the feelings. The playwrights that he most admired write plays that embrace all aspects of the theatre and could not be experienced in any other media. These works move us in ways that words alone can not; they speak at a level so deep that the "spirit responds before the mind."[1] These plays are often non-naturalistic, and Rich encouraged writers to aim beyond naturalism. A writer that speaks to the spirit, the mind, and the senses in a way that is peculiar to him has a "voice." This was Rich's highest praise for either a new or an experienced playwright. A play from a writer with a voice has an afterlife that is hard to silence, the kind "that can make you . . . bolt upright at 3 in the morning" weeks after the performance.[2]

Rich was accused of being too immersed in the Broadway

[1]Rich, "Exit the Critic," 39.

[2]Rich, "Guidebook to the Soul of a City," II:1:1.

consciousness to appreciate experimental theatre or international works. He consistently praised the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, liked much of Charles Busch's work, and often talked of how much Mabou Mines' *Dead End Kids* affected him. But Rich dismissed other unconventional works either in reviews or by simply staying away from them, and, ultimately, he came across as detached.

Rich was extremely knowledgeable about musicals. He evaluated them using many of the same standards that he applied to plays. He liked daring, elliptical writing, compelling characters and stories, and shows that deal with the timeless through the specific, and he didn't like platitudes, didacticism, and simply retreading tired and worn formulas. In addition, he wanted the book, music, characters, and dance to meld into a unified piece, and he wanted all elements to go toward dramatizing rather than announcing events and themes. Revivals should, above all, be "freshly minted." Rich was brought up on Broadway musicals of the 1950s and 1960s and did much to help create an environment favorable for their revivals. Although partial to American book musicals, he did praise some of the sung-through musicals imported from London, notably *Miss Saigon* and *Les Misérables.* He was not afraid to say that a musical had "gone gloriously show biz" and mean it as a compliment.[3] Andrew Lloyd Webber's work was prominent on Broadway during much of Rich's tenure, but this was no thanks to Rich, who consistently belittled Lloyd Webber's efforts.

Rich showed less insight and enthusiasm in writing about the classics than he did about new plays. Although he rarely seemed to be intent on debunking an author or a work and he wasn't overly stingy with favorable reviews, neither was what he wrote likely to send people rushing to the box

[3]Review of *Les Misérables*, 13 May 1987, C1:1.

office. His reviews of the classics emphasized production, directing, and acting, not text, and he was most concerned with the director's concept and how well it was executed. Although he was an admirer of Joseph Papp's, Rich was never considered an advocate of the Public Theater's Shakespeare Festival. He was a staunch and consistent supporter of revivals of O'Neill.

The most distinctive aspect of Rich's criticism was his penchant for connecting plays to the world outside the theatre. His insistence on these connections was his way of keeping the theatre from seeming irrelevant, of saying that the theatre, and what is grist for the theatre, are indeed current, valuable, vital. Though the great plays often make these connections with society, they go beyond that to deal with what is eternal in human nature, too. Rich extracted these connecting links even when they were not readily apparent: Part of the critic's job, he said, is to determine for himself what a work means. Rich saw another important effect coming from plays that deal both with the immediate and the eternal: They force the audience, along with the people onstage, to question their ideas and illusions about themselves. In addition to finding connections with the world, Rich worked hard at finding themes among an author's works. Rich's admiration for plays that deal with society's concerns showed in his unrelenting support for plays on homosexual themes. These plays can give theatre a claim to importance. His article about taking his two sons to see *Falsettos* was important in bringing a crossover audience both to that play and to others that followed, and although *Angels in America* was never lacking for supporters or hype Rich's accolades all along the way—for productions in London, Los Angeles, and New York—were instrumental in turning that play into the phenomenon that it was. Rich also wrote poignantly about plays about alienation, loneliness, loss, abandonment, and parents and

children. His own past—the product of a broken home who retreated into the world of theatre—seemed to surface in these reviews. As one writer said, he may have been using the mask of the critic to make emotional connections to his past,[4] and if any single review could help the reader get a handle on Frank Rich, it probably would be his touching look at *Gypsy*.

Although not generally considered an "actor's critic," Rich was pleased with the overall quality of the acting he saw. Rich wanted his actors to inhabit the character, to take risks, to give nuanced, detailed performances. He disliked "sloppy" acting, surface, superficial portrayals, and mechanical performances that rely on artifice and mannerisms. The best acting, like the best writing, concerns itself with what is between-the-lines, with what is not said as well as what is said. When the acting was outstanding Rich often began his review with it and weaved it throughout, calling attention to specifics aspects of the actor's performance. More often, his focus was on the script and he commented on the acting later in the review. He could be ruthless with actors in a production that was bad, but if a play was good on the whole and was marred only by a weak performance, he was kinder toward the offending actor. Among his favorites were Kevin Kline, Stockard Channing, Ian McKellen, Bernadette Peters, and Nathan Lane.

Rich admitted he had trouble assessing what praise or blame should go to the director of a work, and generally commented on the direction only within a larger statement about some aspect of the production. Even if a production were outstanding, he usually credited the writing and limited his comments on the director. The exceptions were his reviews of the classics. There he asked the director to explore the heart of the text to find its meaning and its passions, and to present them through a personal, inventive, and passionate vision that

[4]Brown, "The Most Powerful Man on Broadway," 139.

worked in concert with, not against, the text. Rich favored a bold, innovative approach in unearthing and illuminating the heart of a classic. He frequently complained about by-the-book, stock, passionless staging that did not explore the contradictions within the text and that hid rather than revealed the play's virtues. Miscasting and misconceiving a production were among the most debilitating mistakes that a director could make. As he did with writers, Rich invariably inserted into his review some mention of a director's earlier work.

Because of a long-held interest in design and because he felt strongly about a "total" theatre experience, Rich did not shortchange the design element the way some critics do, and even his detractors gave him credit for his ability to evaluate technical and design work. Some of his reviews that best recreated the event for the reader focused on the design's contribution. Even when Rich wrote only a line or two about the design, he tried to gage its effectiveness and comment on how it did or did not work, for practical or aesthetic reasons. He also frequently mentioned a designer's earlier work.

Whereas Rich's views on theatre have to be distilled almost exclusively from his reviews, he dispensed more, largely rote, commentary on the nature of criticism. Much of Rich's thought was tied to his view of the critic-as-journalist. Rich said he saw himself as a journalist who happened to be covering theatre, and his audience, first and last, was the *New York Times* reader. He used the critic's tools and resources to do what any reporter does—report on an event for the benefit of the reader. Rich insisted that he was not writing for the artist or for the theatre in general, but then obfuscated that by speaking of championing new writers and under-appreciated plays. Rich's readership was hard to define because the *Times* reached such a large, diverse, and far-flung audience, but Rich said he wrote for the most intelligent reader he could imagine. His readers

were opinionated, sophisticated, demanding, and skeptical of favorable reviews. He said they did not follow him or any other critic unquestioningly, though many of those who suffered his negative reviews would not have agreed.

Rich believed that the essential qualities for a critic are the ability to write well, a passion for theatre, and a reservoir of knowledge about theatre, about the arts, and about life itself.

Rich was a good writer; he was extremely knowledgeable, thorough, graceful, and was never shortchanged by time or space. His sentences were evocative and his best reviews read like essays. Though he was readable, he was not warm and inviting. There was little humility in his writing, and he could come across as if the play were not the equal of the review, as if he were most interested, not in the play, but in watching himself write and watching for the effect that he would have. Even Rich's detractors praised his writing skill, though with ulterior motives; being a good writer only made him all the more destructive, they said.

Although Rich often insisted that he had a passion for theatre, his critics did not agree. According to Rich, passion comes through in a review and causes the reader to go see even shows that get negative reviews; that is the test of a good critic, he said. But it is hard to find even one of Rich's negative reviews that did that, and, from the tone he so often took, difficult to believe he would have applauded those readers who ignored his advice. Rich certainly could be passionate about shows that he wished to champion. Then, he could, as one writer put it, "make you feel the whole theater has risen cheering to its feet."[5]

Rich had a voluminous knowledge of Broadway's history and was well-

[5]Berman, "Is Theater Criticism Dead," 28.

versed in many other areas important to the critic. He could use that knowledge unwisely though, sometimes stuffing his review with an overwhelming amount of show business trivia, minutiae, comparisons and contrasts. On the other hand, his more circumspect allusions to theatre history and other arts added both flavor and trenchant information to his reviews. Rich, who had almost no practical experience working in theatre, didn't see that as a disadvantage; he believed that a lifetime of watching and reading plays is just as important.

Following his mentor, Walter Kerr, Rich said that his main purpose as a reviewer was to recreate the theatregoing event for the reader. He could indeed create a sense of excitement and make a play come alive, using every bit of a review to bring a reader under his spell, especially on a show that he admired. He also could paint a picture of the dismal time to be had at a show he disliked. He was not as adept at recreating the event in his mixed reviews, and there usually gave a more prosaic report.

Although Rich said he took no pleasure in judging a play, his tone indicated otherwise. He often disdained the mixed review in favor of the pan or rave, reflecting the hit-or-miss philosophy of Broadway reviewing. In most pans, Rich was a "first paragraph killer," early on delivering a debilitating blow from which the play had little chance of recovering. Rich also could forget to let the tone fit the circumstances and could do more damage than he might have intended. His harshness was an especially sore point with the theatre industry because he didn't acknowledge it. Rich was more generous in the mixed review, usually dealing with the show's virtues before turning to its flaws. He would sometimes give credit to a show with no grand ambitions that succeeded on its own modest terms, but if a production, modest or otherwise, hit a particular sore spot, he would lambaste it. Rich could be charitable toward

young writers, giving credit when he heard a "voice" rising from among the flaws and allowing the writer time to develop his craft. In interviews, Rich defended his judgmental style by saying that there is no "right" or "wrong" opinion. But everything else about his style and his tenure overall suggests that he felt otherwise. His writing did not convey the idea that his was only one of a number of equally valid opinions.

Rich was concerned not only with the effects that he saw on stage, but also with the causes that produced those effects. He usually tried to give evidence for what brought about his impressions, citing, for example, ways in which the design contributed or detracted and how choices that the actor made enhanced his performance. Rich believed that he had to be very specific in his reviews so that the reader could come to know his taste and could make educated decisions about his evaluations.

Unlike some critics, Rich did not take the audience's response into account in writing his review and he seldom acknowledged if his opinion was at odds with the majority's. In fact, Rich's tenure was marked by a certain indifference to the audience's likes and dislikes. George Jean Nathan distilled his critical credo into the statement: "Good drama is anything that interests an intelligently emotional group of persons assembled together in an illuminated hall."[6] Rich, however, dictated what was good drama, along with bad drama and important drama, and whether or not it interested this "assembled group" seemed of little consequence. Because Rich's readers were audience members or potential audience members, his attitude calls into question his insistence that he was solely concerned with the *New York Times* reader. It seems he wanted them to know what he thought but was less concerned with what they thought or wanted.

[6]Nathan, *The Critic and the Drama*, 33.

As chief drama critic for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich had extraordinary power over the American theatre. He recognized this and he put his influence to work to restore to theatre some of the relevance and importance it had lost to other media or had squandered away through its own greed, ineptitude, and mediocrity. We have seen, again and again, that the heart of Rich's criticism was comparing theatre to life. Plays that have something to say about life are important beyond the four walls of the theatre, and criticism of these plays is important, too.

Rich cultivated a voice of authority with his readers. He didn't need to cajole, or be likable, or to argue, or to use quips and witticisms to make his point. He dismissed all that in favor of an informative style—one that established him as the man in the know—a style that linked plays to the world, linked themes among an artist's work, and linked those themes to universal truths. His writing style conspired with the circumstances of the times to entrench him on the throne. He was not offering opinion so much as handing down pronouncements. He also began to put forward those theatre artists that he wanted recognized and the effect was to make the theatrical arts more important. Rich, too, became more important, a kingmaker, anointing the people who could help shape theatre. Rich defined himself through his reviews and his tenure and emerged as an important character in the theatre of theatre. As that character, as the voice of authority, as the champion of theatre's links to the world and to truth, as his readers' guide, his review became definitive and necessary.

Rich cannot be understood as a critic without understanding him as a writer. Like any writer, he wanted to write that which would stand up over time, but he knew that everything he wrote would not do this. So he persevered

through the mediocre, always waiting for the great play and the great review. The plays that Rich waited on and spent himself on—*Angels in America, Six Degrees of Separation, Falsettos, A Lie of the Mind, Gypsy, Eastern Standard, Sunday in the Park with George, Marvin's Room*, some few others—are the ones that define him as a critic. These plays, and Rich's reviews of them, could be important in helping influence both theatre and society. These plays all were well-written, inventive, and theatrical but all were intensely personal to Rich as well. They touched chords that could be traced back to a youngster who knew loss and alienation and who turned to the theatre, a world of make-believe, as an escape. They dealt with people who, like Jake and Frankie, hunger for salvation, who, like Ouisa Kittredge, are tying to reconnect with something authentic in their lives, who, like Baby June, Mamma Rose, and Louise, perform in the hope of being loved and accepted. Another theme ran throughout an uncommon number of these plays: At their heart were liberal social issues. Rich asked that the theatre produce outstanding plays, to be sure, but he wanted the very best of these to do more than entertain; he wanted them to help move theatre, and the world that theatre reflects, in a more liberal direction. The most conspicuous example was the mainstream acceptance of plays with homosexual characters and themes, and it is generally agreed that much of the responsibility for this goes to Rich.

Rich also must get some credit, or blame, for perpetuating the hit-or-miss style of reviewing, the lethal pan, and the weighty, informative style of looking at plays that, at its best, is insightful, instructive, colorful, and, at its worse, can become turgid, dense, pretentious. Overall, we see that Rich fell victim to some common problems of critics and avoided others. He exaggerated strengths and weaknesses of a play; he could be cruel at the artist's expense; he did not

temper his negative criticism; he sometimes saw his review as more important than the play; he did not take into account any discrepancy between his response and that of the audience; he pointed out problems he saw besetting the theatre but did not champion solutions.

On the other hand, he gave reasons for his praise and blame; he allowed artists to try new things and didn't simply fault them for deviating from their usual patterns; he evaluated the work of a playwright, a director, an actor, a designer, and a theatre within the framework of their entire body of work; and he looked at theatre in relation to other arts and society. He helped launch or advance the careers of a significant number of American theatre artists, including Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Eric Bogosian, August Wilson, William Finn, John Guare, Lanford Wilson, Jon Robin Baitz, David Henry Hwang, and Craig Lucas. He especially liked Jerry Zaks, George Wolfe, Charles Ludlam, the Steppenwolf Company, Kevin Kline, Stockard Channing, and Joseph Papp, and he helped turn Stephen Sondheim, Michael Bennett, and Sam Shepard into near legendary theatrical figures.

Ultimately, though, his legacy was limiting. He did not so much develop, as mold readers' tastes. For any one person—even an intelligent, educated, articulate person like Rich—to be pulling and pushing the theatre into shape, his shape, was doing theatre a disservice. In championing plays so intimately tied to his own cosmos, Rich was dismissive of those tied to others', and theatre is not built to house the hopes of only one person or one way of thinking. It is broad-based, appeals to many people, and is subject to myriad opinions, including those of the audience and the reader. Rich led theatre people and audiences down an alley he thought was bold, exciting, progressive; an alley others said was safe, superficial, attenuated—and much too narrow.

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Reviews by Frank Rich

(All reviews appeared in the *New York Times*. They are alphabetized and are divided by year.)

1980 — (87 reviews)

An Act of Kindness, 12 September, C5:5.
Album, 11 June, C26:3.
Album, 2 October, C15:1.
Amadeus, 18 December, C17:1.
American Buffalo, 21 October, C8:3.
The American Clock, 27 May, C7:1.
The American Clock, 21 November, C3:1.

The Bacchae, 3 October, C3:1.
Back in the Race, 18 April, C3:5.
Banjo Dancing, 22 October, C21:1.
Barnum, 1 May, C17:1.
Bent, 19 June, C16:3.
Between Daylight and Boonville, 18 September, C17:1.
Bits & Pieces, 9 June, C12:3.
Bonjour, la, Bonjour, 14 October, C5:3.
Brigadoon, 17 October, C3:1.

Camelot, 9 July, C15:1.
Cassatt, 27 June, C5:4.
Charlie and Algernon, 15 September, C17:1.
Chase a Rainbow, 14 June, C13:2.
The Cocktail Party, 13 June, C5:2.
Coming Attractions, 4 December, C18:3.
The Connection, 27 October, C16:1.
A Coupla White Chicks Sitting Around Talking, 2 May, C2:5.
Crimes and Dreams, 16 May, C10:1.
Crimes of the Heart, 22 December, C16:1.

A Day in the Life of the Czar, or I Too Have Lived in Arcadia, 29 October 1980, C24:3.
Dead End Kids, 19 November, C34:1.
Desperately Yours, 25 September, C24:5.
Dialog/Curious George, 26 June, C15:5.
Division Street, 9 October, C19:1.

An Evening With Josephine Baker, 22 April, C10:2.

Fallen Angels, 11 July, C3:1.
Fearless Frank, 16 June, C13:1.
Fifth of July, 6 November, C19:1.
First Lady, 16 July, C17:3.
FOB, 10 June, C6:5.
42nd Street, 26 August, C7:1.

Girls, Girls, Girls, 1 October, C25:1.

The Happy Time, 7 May, C29:4.
Heartbreak House, 30 April, C24:1.
Hide and Seek, 5 May, C13:1.
How I Got That Story, 9 December, C9:3.

The Interview, 24 April, C20:5.

John Gabriel Borkman, 19 December, C3:4.

Knitters in the Sun, 5 June, C18:5.

A Lancashire Lad, 21 May, C30:4.
Last Summer at Bluefish Cove, 27 December, C15:1.
A Lesson From Aloes, 18 November, C9:1.
A Life, 3 November, C13:1.
Lunch Hour, 13 November, C19:1.

The Man Who Shot the Man Who Shot Jesse James, 14 May, C24:5.
Marlon Brando Slept Here, 17 April, C22:1.
The Marriage Dance, An Evening of Farce by Brecht & Feydeau, 3 June, C6:5.
Mass Appeal, 12 May, C13:1.
Misalliance, 31 May, C14:4.
Mixed Couples, 29 December, C12:5.
Musical Chairs, 15 May, C19:1.

Nuts, 29 April, C7:4.

Of the Fields, Lately, 28 May, C16:5.
One Tiger to a Hill, 14 November, C3:5.
Onward Victoria, 15 December, C15:3.

Past Tense, 25 April, C3:1.
Passione, 24 September, C23:1.
Perfectly Frank, 1 December, C14:3.
The Philadelphia Story, 17 November, C15:1.
The Pirates of Penzance, 30 July, C15:1.

A Prelude to Death in Venice, 19 May, C16:3.

Really Rosie, 15 October, C21:5.
Reverse Psychology, 16 September, C17:1.
The Roast, 9 May, C3:1.

The Seagull, 12 November, C25:1.
Sidewalkin', 23 April, C24:5.
Sister and Miss Levine, 23 June, C13:1.
The Suicide, 10 October, C3:1.
Summer, 29 September, C13:1.

The Three Sisters, 31 October, C3:1.
Tintypes, 24 October, C3:1.
Transcendental Love, 26 September, C3:1.
Tricks of the Trade, 7 November, C3:3.
Trixie True, Teen Detective, 5 December, C3:1.
True West, 24 D, C9:1.

Vikings, 10 November, C17:5.

Was It Good For You?, 24 June, C5:4.
The Woolgatherer, 6 June, C3:1.

Yesterday Is Over, 3 July, C16:1.

Zooman and the Sign, 8 December, C13:5.

1981 — (139 reviews)

The Actor's Nightmare, 22 October, C21:1.
After the Prize, 24 November, C7:4.
Alice in Concert, 8 January, C17:1.
Amadeus, 17 December, C22:3.
The Amazing Casey Stengel, or Can't Anybody Here Speak This Game?, 22 April, C19:2.
American Buffalo, 5 June, C3:1.
American Days, 2 January, C3:1.
Animals, 23 April, C18:3.
And I Ain't Finished Yet, 9 December, C28:3.
Arms and the Man, 23 July, C17:4.
As to the Meaning of Words, 3 June, C22:5.

Black People's Party, 27 October, C8:5.
Borders, 29 June, C16:1.
Bring Back Birdie, 6 March, C4:5
The Buddy System, 14 April, C8:5.
The Butler Did It, 4 June, C17:5.

Camelot, 16 November, C16:1.
Can-Can, 1 May, C3:1.
Candida, 16 October, C3:1.
The Captivity of Pixie Shedman, 3 February, C5:1.
Childe Byron, 27 February, C3:3.
Chucky's Hunch, 23 March, C13:1.
Cloud 9, 20 May, C30:1.
Close of Play, 25 February, C24:5.
Copperfield, 17 April, C3:1.
Crimes of the Heart, 5 November, C21:1.
Crossing Niagara, 4 November, C26:1.

The Dance and the Railroad, 31 March, C5:1.
A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, 2 November, C19:3.
Don Juan, 5 July, 25:1.
Double Feature, 9 October, C3:5.
Dreamgirls, 21 December, C11:1.
The Dresser, 10 November, C7:1.
Duet for One, 18 December, C3:1.

Early Days, 29 May, C5:1.
Einstein and the Polar Bear, 30 October, C3:1.
El Bravo, 17 June, C23:4.
An Evening With Dave Allen, 21 September, C18:1.

Extenuating Circumstances, 6 July, C10:1.

Family Devotions, 19 October, C17:1.
The Father, 3 April, C3:1.
The Five O'Clock Girl, 29 January, C13:1.
Fifth of July, 9 April, C20:5.
The First, 18 November, C25:1.
Fishing, 27 April, C20:1.
The Floating Light Bulb, 28 April, C7:1.
Fools, 7 April, C11:1.
Forty-Deuce, 25 March, C23:4.
Forty-Deuce, 12 October, C17:3.
Frankenstein, 5 January, C13:1.

Ghosts of the Loyal Oaks, 4 December, C3:1.
Glasshouse, 24 March, C7:4.
Grace, 20 October, C12:3.
Grown Ups, 18 June, C18:1.
Grown Ups, 11 December, C3:1.

The Hamster of Happiness, 29 June, C16:1.
Harry Ruby's Songs My Mother Never Sang, 27 June, 10:3.
Has 'Washington' Legs?, 4 February, C24:1.
Hedda Gabler, 6 May, C24:5.
Henry V, 13 July, C12:3.
The Hotel Play, 28 August, C3:1.
How I Got That Story, 31 May, 51:1.
How It All Began, 19 June, C3:5.
Hunting Scenes from Lower Bavaria, 15 June, C11:4.

I Won't Dance, 11 May, C13:1.
In an Upstate Motel, 16 April, C22:1.
Inacent Black, 7 May, C19:4.
Inadmissible Evidence, 24 February, C18:1.
It Had to Be You, 11 May, C13:1.

Key Exchange, 10 June, C26:1.
Kingdoms, 14 December, C17:1.

Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music, 13 May, C27:1.
The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby, 5 October, C13:1.
The Little Foxes, 8 May, C3:1.
Lolita, 20 March, C3:1.
Louis, 24 September, C21:1.
Love's Tangled Web, 8 June, C15:1.

Macbeth, 24 January,15:1.
Maggie & Pierre, 28 September, C14:1.
The Man With the Flower in His Mouth, 10 September, C30:4.
March of the Falsettos, 10 April, C3:1.
Marlowe, 13 October, C7:4.
Mary Stuart, 17 February, C5:4.
Mass Appeal, 13 November, C5:1.
Memory of Whiteness, 14 January, C17:3.
Merrily We Roll Along, 17 November, C9:1.
A Midsummer Night's Dream, 12 January, C15:4.
Misalliance, 17 July, C3:3.
Miss Julie, 10 December, C25:3.
Missing Persons, 21 May, C19:4.
The Moony Shapiro Songbook, 4 May, C13:4.
My Sister in This House, 23 November, C17:1.

Ned and Jack, 22 May, C3:1.
Ned and Jack, 9 November, C13:2.

Oedipus the King, 24 April, C3:1.
Oh, Brother!, 11 November, C23:4.

Pantomime, 30 May, 10:2.
Penguin Touquet, 2 February, C14:1.
Piaf, 6 February, C3:1.
The Pirates of Penzance, 9 January, C3:1.
The Pirates of Penzance, 30 September, C22:5.
Playing With Fire, 10 December, C25:3.
Precious Blood, 15 October, C21:1.

Q.E.D., 14 September, C17:3.

Rattlesnake in a Cooler, 15 October, C21:1.
Real Life Funnies, 12 February, C23:1.
The Recruiting Officer, 23 January, C3:1.
Rose, 27 March, C3:1.

Scenes and Revelations, 26 June, C3:4.
Sea Marks, 25 September, C3:3.
Shakespeare's Cabaret, 22 January, C15:5.
Showdown at the Adobe Motel, 13 February, C3:1.
Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You, 22 October, C21:1.
A Soldier's Play, 27 November, C3:1.
Something Cloudy, Something Clear, 11 September, C3:1.

Sophisticated Ladies, 2 March, C13:1.
Still Life, 20 February, C3:1.
The Survivor, 4 March, C20:5.

A Tale Told, 12 June, C3:1.
A Talent for Murder, 2 October, C3:1.
A Taste of Honey, 29 April, C19:1.
The Tempest, 4 July, C12:3.
The Tempest, 10 July, C3:1.
Threads, 26 October, C18:3.
Tomfoolery, 15 December, C9:5.
Translations, 15 April, C23:1.
To Grandmother's House We Go, 16 January, C3:1.
Turnbuckle, 8 July, C25:1.
Twelve Dreams, 23 December, C9:1.

Waiting for the Parade, 27 January, C20:3.
Wally's Cafe, 13 June, 14:1.
Weep Not for Me, 9 February, C15:5.
The West Side Waltz, 20 November, C5:1.
When the Chickens Came Home to Roost, 15 July, C21:3.
Whistler, 7 December, C17:4.
Woman of the Year, 30 March, C15:1.
Wrong Guys, 15 May, C5:1.

Ya'acobi and Leidental, 12 September, 13:5.

Zora, 15 July, C21:3.

1982 — (135 reviews)

The Actors, 17 November, C30:3.
The Actor's Nightmare, 7 October, C20:3.
Agnes of God, 31 March, C23:4.
a/k/a Tennessee, 28 September, C17:1.
Alice in Wonderland, 24 December, C3:1.
Almost an Eagle, 17 December, C3:1.
Am I Blue, 11 January, C14:3.
Amadeus, 1 June, C10:3.
American Princess, 12 October, C10:3.
Angels Fall, 18 October, C15:1.
The Animal Kingdom, 23 July, C5:3.
Antigone, 28 April, C19:1.
Appearances, 14 May, C4:5.

Back to Back, 3 November, C22:5.
Bella Figura, 13 April, C11:1.
Beside the Seaside, 20 January, C24:3.
Beyond Therapy, 27 May, C19:4.
Black Angel, 20 December, C12:5.
Blues in the Night, 3 June, C17:1.
Breakfast With Les and Bess, 6 December, C13:1.
The Browning Version, 23 April, C3:1.
Buddies, 5 June, 11:1.

The Caretaker, 25 February, C15:5.
Cats, 8 October, C3:1.
The Chalk Garden, 30 April, C3:1.
Colored People's Time, 1 April, C28:1.
Come Back to the 5 & Dime Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, 19 February, C3:1.
Confluence, 11 January, C14:3.
The Curse of an Aching Heart, 26 January, C7:1.

The Death of von Richthofen as Witnessed From Earth, 30 July, C3:1.
The Dining Room, 15 February, C15:1.
Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?, 28 May, C3:5.
A Doll's Life, 24 September, C3:1.
Don Juan, 2 July, C3:1.
Dreams Deferred, 17 January, 57:1.
Dustoff, 23 January, 15:4.

Edmond, 28 October, C20:3.
84 Charing Cross Road, 8 December, C21:4.
Elegy for a Lady, 10 November, C21:1.

Eminent Domain, 29 March, C14:3.
Exquisite Torture, 13 October, C24:5.
Extremities, 23 December, C14:1.

Five Points, 20 April, C12:1.
Flux, 7 February, 67:1.
Fog, 14 May, C4:5.
The Forest Lawn Diet, 14 May, C4:5.
Foxfire, 12 November, C3:1.

Gardenia, 29 April, C20:3.
Good, 14 October, C17:4.
The Good Parts, 8 January, C3:1.
The Great Grandson of Jedediah Kohler, 23 March, C7:1.

Hamlet, 3 December, C3:1.
Henry IV, Part 1, 12 July, C13:1.
Herman van Veen: All of Him, 9 December, C28:1.
Herringbone, 1 July, C14:5.
Hibakusha: Stories From Hiroshima, 4 March, C13:1.
The Holly and the Ivy, 19 November, C5:1.
Hooters, 21 October, C19:1.
The Hothouse, 7 March, 49:1.
The Hothouse, 7 May, C3:4.
The House Across the Street, 30 January, 11:1.
How I Got That Story, 18 February, C15:1.

Is There Life After High School?, 8 May, 17:1.
The Isle Is Full of Noises, 2 May, 63:1.
It's Only a Play, 26 November, C3:1.

The Journey of the Fifth Horse, 2 March, C9:1.

Knights Errant, 2 December, C18:4.

The Learned Ladies, 15 July, C20:3.
The Liberation of Skopje, 21 September, C15:4.
A Little Family Business, 16 December, C15:1.
Little Johnny Jones, 22 March, C12:3.
Little Me, 22 January, C3:1.
Livin' Dolls, 5 April, C12:3.
Lullabye and Goodnight, 10 February, C24:1.
Lydie Breeze, 26 February, C3:1.

Macbeth, 29 January, C3:1.
'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys, 17 March, C17:3.
'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys, 5 May, C21:1.
Medea, 3 May, C10:1.
Men Inside, 17 September, C3:1.
Mercenaries, 8 July, C16:3.
Michi's Blood, 11 September, 10:5.
The Middle Ages, 14 March, 64:1.
Monday After the Miracle, 26 May, C24:1.
Monday After the Miracle, 15 December, C25:4.

Nine, 10 May, C13:1.

Occupations, 26 March, C23:1.
Ord-Way Ames-Gay, 5 June, 11:1.
Othello, 4 February, C15:1.

Pastorale, 12 April, C11:4.
Play Me a Country Song, 28 June, C14:3.
Plenty, 22 October, C3:1.
Present Laughter, 16 July, C3:1.
Poor Little Lambs, 16 March, C11:1.

The Queen and the Rebels, 1 October, C3:1.

Red and Blue, 12 May, C28:3.
Rhinestone, 23 November, C11:5.
Rosario and the Gypsies, 5 June, 11:1.

Saigon Rose, 30 November, C13:1.
Sally and Marsha, 22 February, C18:1.
Scenes From La Vie de Boheme, 21 May, C3:5.
Secret Lives of the Sexists, 13 February, 14:3.
Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, 9 July, C3:1.
Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, 7 October, C20:3.
Snow Orchid, 11 March, C17:4.
Solitude Forty, 20 May, C20:1.
Solomon's Child, 9 April, C3:3.
Some Kind of Love Story, 10 November, C21:1.
Some Men Need Help, 29 October, C3:1.
Special Occasions, 8 February, C13:1.
Standing on My Knees, 25 October, C13:1.
Steaming, 13 December, C16:1.
Sweet Prince, 25 September, 15:1.

Talking With, 4 October, C16:4.
A Think Piece, 29 June, C7:1.
Three Acts of Recognition, 8 April, C11:2.
Three Sisters, 22 December, C19:1.
Thymus Vulgaris, 11 January, C14:3.
The Twelve-Pound Look, 23 April, C3:1.
Top Girls, 29 December, C17:1.
Twice Around the Park, 5 November, C3:1.
Two Fish in the Sky, 8 November, C13:1.

The Undefeated Rhumba Champ, 14 May, C4:5.

Vivien, 20 May, C20:1.
Voices of America, 17 September, C3:1.

The Wake of Jamey Foster, 15 October, C3:1.
Waltz of the Stork, 6 January, C16:4.
Weekends Like Other People, 12 March, C3:1.
Welcome to the Moon, 24 November, C14:4.
The Whales of August, 11 February, C18:3.
Whodunnit, 31 December, C3:1.
Wonderland, 9 March, C11:1.
The Woods, 17 May, C12:3.
The World of Sholom Aleichem, 12 February, C3:1.

Zastrozzi, 18 January, C14:1.

1983 — (120 reviews)

Ah, Wilderness!, 29 June, C21:1.
All's Well That Ends Well, 14 April, C15:1.
Amen Corner, 11 November, C3:5.
American Buffalo, 28 October, C3:1.
American Passion, 11 July, C11:1.
And a Nightingale Sang, 28 November, C14:3.
Another Country, 14 January, C3:1.
The Arbor, 21 September, C22:4.

Baby, 5 December, C20:4.
Baby With the Bathwater, 9 November, C21:4.
Big Maggie, 29 September, C21:1.
The Birthday Present, 18 April, C12:5.
Blood Relations, 16 February, C24:5.
Blue Plate Special, 16 November, C26:3.
Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde, 15 April, C3:1.
Brighton Beach Memoirs, 28 March, C9:4.
Brothers, 10 November, C19:5.
Buck, 11 March, C5:1.
Buried Inside Extra, 5 May, C19:1.

La Cage aux Folles, 22 August, C13:1.
The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial, 6 May, C5:1.
Christmas on Mars, 3 June, C3:1.
The Cradle Will Rock, 10 May, C11:1.

Dance A Little Closer, 12 May, C18:5.
The Day They Shot John Lennon, 26 January, C18:5.
A Different Moon, 18 February, C3:1.
Domestic Issues, 14 March, C12:5.
Doonesbury, 22 November, C14:5.
Dreamgirls, 23 September, C3:1.

Edmund Kean, 28 September, C19:1.
Egyptology (My Head Was a Sledgehammer), 18 May, C17:5.
Elba, 11 April, C20:2.
Emmett, A One Mormon Show, 8 July, C3:1.
The Entertainer, 21 January, C3:1.

Fanshen, 3 February, C20:1.
Fen, 31 May, C10:5.
The Flying Karamazov Brothers, 11 May, C17:5.
Fool for Love, 27 May, C3:1.

Full Hookup, 30 December, C3:4.
Funhouse, 8 July, C3:1.

Galas, 16 September, C3:1.
Gifted Children, 23 December, C3:5.
The Glass Menagerie, 2 December, C3:1.
The Groves of Academe, 30 March, C27:1.

Half a Lifetime, 30 March, C27:1.
Heartbreak House, 8 December, C17:1.
The House of Ramon Iglesia, 18 March, C3:1.
The Human Comedy, 29 December, C15:1.

I'm Tired and I Want to Go to Bed, 18 April, C12:5.
Ivanov, 22 July, C5:5.

K2, 31 March, C16:5.

The Lady and the Clarinet, 29 November, C15:1.
Living Quarters, 24 February, C17:1.
Lumiere, 17 February, C22:3.

Mame, 25 July, C11:1.
The Man Who Had Three Arms, 6 April, C15:1.
Manhattan Made Me, 19 May, C17:5.
Marilyn: An American Fable, 21 November, C14:3.
The Master Builder, 13 October, C22:3.
Merlin, 31 January, C22:5.
The Middle Ages, 24 March, C17:4.
The Misanthrope, 28 January, C3:1.
Modern Ladies of Guanabacoa, 27 January, C15:3.
Moose Murders, 23 February, C16:5.
My One and Only, 2 May, C13:3.
My Uncle Sam, 12 October, C19:5.

A New Approach to Human Sacrifice, 18 April, C12:5.
'night Mother, 12 January, C15:4.
'night Mother, 1 April, C3:1.
Noises Off, 12 December, C12:1.

On Your Toes, 7 March, C13:1.
Orgasmo Adulto Escapes From the Zoo, 5 August, C3:1.

Painting Churches, 9 February, C16:3.
Painting Churches, 23 November, C13:1.

Passion, 16 May, C14:1.
Peg, 15 December, C17:2.
The Philanthropist, 14 October, C3:1.
Porgy and Bess, 8 April, C3:1.
Private Lives, 9 May, C12:5.

Quartermaine's Terms, 7 January, C3:1.
Quartermaine's Terms, 25 February, C3:1.

A Raisin in the Sun, 5 October, C24:1.
Richard III, 15 July, C3:1.

The Sad Lament of Pecos Bill on the Eve of Killing His Wife, 20 September, C16:2.
Sand Dancing, 24 October, C17:1.
The Sea Gull, 25 November, C3:1.
Second Prize: Two Months in Leningrad, 20 October, C28:1.
Serious Bizness, 30 September, C3:1.
Show Boat, 25 April, C12:3.
Skirmishes, 3 January, C17:4.
Slab Boys, 8 March, C11:1.
Slacks and Tops, 30 March, C27:1.
Something Different, 23 March, C22:5.
Sons and Fathers of Sons, 1 February, C11:2.
Sound and Beauty, 7 November, C13:1.
Summer, 11 February, C3:1.
Superstitions, 20 September, C16:2.
Sympathy, 15 November, C11:5.

Tallulah, 31 October, C14:5.
The Tap Dance Kid, 22 December, C11:3.
Teaneck Tanzi: The Venus Flytrap, 21 April, C13:1.
That's It, Folks, 28 June, C11:5.
Third Street, 18 April, C12:5.
To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday, 4 November, C3:1.
Top Girls, 17 March, C17:1.
Total Abandon, 29 April, C3:1.
La Tragedie de Carmen, 18 November, C3:1.
The Transfiguration of Benno Blimpie, 21 March, C10:3.

Uncle Vanya, 15 September, C27:1.
Up From Paradise, 26 October, C22:4.

A View From the Bridge, 4 February, C3:1.

Wednesday, 6 December, C14:6.
A Weekend Near Madison, 14 September, C22:1.
What I Did Last Summer, 7 February, C12:3.
Wild Life, 4 May, C24:1.
Win/Lose/Draw, 26 April, C13:1.
Winners, 22 April, C3:4.
Winterplay, 23 May, C14:1.

You Can't Take It With You, 5 April, C9:1.

Zorba, 17 October, C15:1.

1984 — (108 reviews)

A . . . My Name is Alice, 27 February, C14:3.
Accidental Death of an Anarchist, 16 November, C3:1.
The Accrington Pals, 18 December, C18:1.
After the Fall, 5 October, C3:1.
All Night Long, 29 March, C21:5.
Alone Together, 22 October, C15:5.
The Archaeology of Sleep, 19 January, C14:3.
Awake and Singl, 9 March, C3:1.

Babalooney, 16 February, C22:5.
The Ballad of Soapy Smith, 13 November, C15:2.
Balm in Gilead, 1 June, C5:1.
Been Taken, 31 May, C17:5.
Beethoven's Tenth, 23 April, C11:1.
Bing and Walker, 3 December, C16:1.
The Bloodletters, 7 December, C3:1.
Broken Eggs, 23 February, C17:5.

Cinders, 21 February, C18:3.
Come Back, Little Sheba, 13 July, C3:1.
The Country Girl, 19 October, C5:1.
Criminal Minds, 18 January, C24:1.
Cyrano de Bergerac, 17 October, C21:1.

The Danube, 13 March, C13:1.
Death of a Salesman, 30 March, C3:1.
Design for Living, 21 June, C15:1.
Diamonds, 17 December, C12:5.
District Line, 5 December, C24:3.

End of the World, 7 May, C15:1.
Endgame, 29 June, C3:1.
Enough, 17 February, C3:1.
Enter a Free Man, 1 October, C16:5.

Fables for Friends, 20 February, C13:2.
The Fairy Garden, 20 June, C23:1.
Feathertop, 29 October, C16:4.
Fen, 5 March, C12:5.
Fixed Up, 11 May, C3:1.
Footfalls, 17 February, C3:1.
The Foreigner, 2 November, C3:1.
Found a Peanut, 18 June, C15:4.

Friends, 11 January, C16:3.

Getting Along Famously, 7 February, C13:3.
Glengarry Glen Ross, 26 March, C17:1.
The Golden Age, 13 April, C3:1.

Hang On to Me, 19 May, 11:1.
The Harvesting, 2 April, C16:3.
Henry V, 6 July, C3:1.
Homesteaders, 8 March, C24:1.
Hurlyburly, 22 June, C3:1.
Husbandry, 10 December, C14:3.

Ian McKellen Acting Shakespeare, 20 January, C3:1.
In Celebration, 9 November, C3:1.
In the Garden, 11 May, C3:1.
The Incredibly Famous Willie Rivers, 21 December, C3:1.

Jazz, 31 May, C17:5.
Jesse's Land, 28 September, C3:1.

A Kind of Alaska, 18 April, C21:5.
Kipling, 11 October, C19:1.

La Brea Tarpits, 17 January, C11:5.
Levitation, 13 February, C15:5.
Linda Her, 20 June, C23:1.
Love, 16 April, C19:5.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, 11 April, C19:1.
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, 12 October, C1:5.
The Man Who Could See Through Time, 16 March, C3:1.
Mensch Meier, 29 February, C19:3.
Messiah, 24 December, 11:4.
The Miss Firecracker Contest, 28 May, 11:4.
A Moon for the Misbegotten, 2 May, C21:1.
Mother Courage and Her Children, 29 January, 41:1.
Mr. and Mrs., 24 May, C4:3.
Much Ado About Nothing, 15 October, C12:3.

The Nest of the Woodgrouse, 15 June, C3:1.
North Atlantic, 1 February, C16:1.

Old Times, 13 January, C3:1.
Oliver, 30 April, C11:4.

One for the Road, 18 April, C21:5.
Open Admissions, 30 January, C13:1.
Orwell That Ends Well, 2 March, C3:1.

Play Memory, 27 April, C3:1.

Quilters, 26 September, C17:1.

Rap Master Ronnie, 4 October, C16:1.
The Real Thing, 6 January, C3:1.
The Real Thing, 1 August, C16:4.
The Rink, 10 February, C3:1.
The Road to Mecca, 15 May, C17:1.
Rockaby, 17 February, C3:1.
Romance, 11 May, C3:1.
Romance Language, 15 November, C23:4.

A Sense of Loss, 31 May, C17:5.
Serenading Louie, 3 February, C3:1.
Shirley MacLaine on Broadway, 20 April, C3:1.
Short Eyes, 28 November, C19:4.
Strike Up the Band, 11 July, C23:1.
Sunday in the Park With George, 3 May, C21:1.

Tender Places, 11 May, C3:1.
Terra Nova, 26 April, C18:5.
The Three Musketeers, 12 November, C13:3.
Through the Leaves, 6 April, C3:1.
To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday, 23 March, C3:1.
Total Eclipse, 14 December, C3:1.
La Tradedie de Carmen, 22 March, C17:1.

The Vampires, 12 April, C18:3.
Vermont Sketches, 31 May, C17:5.
Victoria Station, 18 April, C21:5.
Viva Vittorio!, 21 September, C3:1.

The Wiz, 25 May, C3:1.
Whoopi Goldberg, 25 October, C17:4.
A Woman of Independent Means, 4 May, C3:1.
Woza Albert!, 24 February, C3:1.

1985 — (118 reviews)

Aggressive Behavior, 27 May, 11:1.
Aren' t We All?, 30 April, C13:1.
Arms and the Man, 31 May, C3:1.
As Is, 11 March, C12:4.
Aunt Dan and Lemon, 29 October, C13:1.

The Beach House, 20 December, C3:1.
Been Taken, 10 December, C18:1.
Benefactors, 23 December, C11:1.
Before the Dawn, 25 March, C15:1.
Between Cars, 27 May 11:1.
Big River, 26 April, C3:1.
Biloxi Blues, 29 March, C3:1.
Blood Knot, 11 December, C23:1.
The Boys of Winter, 2 December, C11:4.

California Dog Fight, 1 May, C16:3.
Childhood, 30 May, C19:4.
Coming of Age in Soho, 4 February, C14:3.
The Common Pursuit, 2 February, 11:1.
The Count of Monte Cristo, 20 May, C16:1.
The Courtroom, 10 May, C7:1.
The Crate, 15 February, C3:1.
Cruise Control, 27 November, C14:1.
The Custom of the Country, 23 September, C16:5.

Dancing in the End Zone, 4 January, C3:1.
A Day in the Death of Joe Egg, 7 January, C13:1.
Dennis, 29 November, C3:4.
Desperadoes, 27 May, 11:1.
Digby, 20 March, C17:1.
Dysan, 21 January, C23:1.

Eden Court, 15 May, C19:1.
An Enemy of the People, 11 April, C18:4.

Fabiola, 6 September, C3:1.
The Fantod, 19 March, C13:5.
Faulkner's Bicycle, 10 June, C15:1.
Fences, 7 May C17:1.
Field Day, 12 April, C3:1.
Follies, 9 September, C16:1.
For No Good Reason, 30 May, C19:4.

The Frog Prince, 16 May, C23:4.

The Golden Windows, 28 October, C13:4.
Grind, 17 April, C20:1.
The Ground Zero Club, 12 April, C3:1.

Hang on to the Good Times, 19 February, C18:4.
Harrigan 'n Hart, 1 February, C3:1.
Hay Fever, 13 December, C3:1.
Henrietta, 29 January, C13:1.
The Hit Parade, 19 July, C3:1.
The Hitch-Hikers, 1 March, C3:1.
Home Front, 3 January, C13:1.

The Iceman Cometh, 30 September, C11:1.
I'm Not Rappaport, 7 June, C3:1.
In Trousers, 27 March, C19:1.

Jacques and His Master, 24 January, C19:1.
Jerry's Girls, 19 December, C14:1.
Juno's Swans, 29 May, C18:1.

The King and I, 8 January, C13:1.

Leader of the Pack, 9 April, C11:1.
Lemon Sky, 12 December, C17:4.
Leo, 9 October, C17:2.
Let the Artists Die, 15 October, C17:4.
A Lie of the Mind, 6 December, C3:1.
Life and Limb, 25 January, C3:1.
Life Under Water, 16 May, C23:4.

Madonna, 9 October, C17:2.
A Man of the World, 2 October, C23:1.
Mariens Kammer, 16 May, C23:4.
The Marriage of Bette and Boo, 17 May, C3:1.
The Marriage of Figaro, 11 October, C3:1.
Mayor, 14 May, C11:1.
Men Without Dates, 16 May, C23:4.
Mrs. Warren's Profession, 16 December, C15:1.
The Mystery of Edwin Drood, 23 August, C3:3.
The Mystery of Edwin Drood, 3 December, C21:1.

The News, 8 November, C3:4.
Noises Off, 28 January, C13:1.

The Normal Heart, 22 April, C17:1.
Not About Heroes, 22 October, C13:1.
Not Waving, 15 March, C3:1.

The Octette Bridge Club, 6 March, C17:1.
The Odd Couple, 12 June, C21:1.
Oliver Oliver, 13 November, C25:1.
Orphans, 8 May, C22:1.
Out of Gas on Lovers Leap, 3 May, C3:3.

Pack of Lies, 12 February, C13:4.
Penn and Teller, 19 April, C3:1.
Personals, 25 November, C16:4.
The Playboy of the Western World, 21 February, C17:5.
Prarie du Chien, 24 December, C11:2.
Private Scenes, 15 January, C15:1.

Rat in the Skull, 22 May, C18:4.
Raw Youth, 11 July, C20:2.
Requiem for a Heavyweight, 8 March, C3:1.
The Road to the Graveyard, 27 May, 11:1.
Russia, 21 November, C18:3.

Salonika, 3 April, C17:1.
Season' s Greetings, 12 July, C3:1.
The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe, 27 September, C3:1.
The Shawl, 24 December, C11:2.
Sid Caesar and Company, 2 November, C19:3.
Singin' in the Rain, 3 July, C9:3.
Sister and Miss Lexie,18 July, C21:1.
Soapopera, 9 October, C17:2.
Sonata, 12 April, C3:1.
Song and Dance, 19 September, C19.
The Special, 5 November, C20:1.
Strange Interlude, 22 February, C3:1.

Take Me Along, 15 April, C16:1.
Talley & Son, 23 October, C19:1.
Three Complaints, 9 October, C17:2.
3 Guys Naked From the Waist Down, 6 February, C17:1.
Tom and Viv, 7 February, C23:1.
Tomorrow's Monday, 21 October, C18:4.
Tracers, 22 January, C13:1.
True to Life, 12 April, C3:1.

The Vienna Notes, 5 April, C3:1.
Virginia, 5 March, C13:4.

The Waltz of the Toreadors, 17 October, C16:1.

Yours, Anne, 14 October, C16:4.

1986 — (78 reviews)

Alterations, 31 October, C3:1.
Arsenic and Old Lace, 27 June, C3:1.
The Artificial Jungle, 23 September, C13:4.
Asinamalil, 12 September, C3:4.
Aunt Dan and Lemon, 28 March, C3:4.

The Balcony, 23 January, C19:4.
Be Happy for Me, 8 January, C19:1.
Big Deal, 11 April, C3:1.
Black Girl, 4 March, C13:4.
Blind Date, 13 May, C13:1.
Bodies, Rest and Motion, 15 December, C17:5.
Born in the R.S.A., 3 October, C3:1.
Bothal, 19 September, C3:4.
The Boys in Autumn, 1 May, C19:1.
Broadway Bound, 5 December, C3:1.
Brownstone, 7 November, C3:4.

Caligula, 3 February, C22:3.
The Caretaker, 31 January, C3:1.
Coastal Disturbances, 20 November, C25:1.
The Colored Museum, 3 November, C17:1.
The Common Pursuit, 20 October, C17:1.
Corpse!, 6 January, C11:1.

Dream of a Blacklisted Actor, 12 December, C3:1.
Drinking in America, 21 January, C15:1.

Fresh Horses, 12 February, C17:1.
The Front Page, 24 November, C13:1.
The Further Adventures of Kathy & Mo, 13 June, C3:1.

The Hands of Its Enemy, 19 November, C29:1.
Help Wanted, 17 February, C11:4.
Highest Standard of Living, 14 November, C3:1.
The House of Blue Leaves, 20 March, C21:1.

Idiot's Delight, 24 February, C12:1.
In This Fallen City, 26 September, C3:1
Into the Light, 23 October, C19:4.
It's Only a Play, 13 January, C11:4.

Jerome Kern Goes to Hollywood, 24 January, C3:1.
Joe Turner's Come and Gone, 6 May, C17:2.
Jonah and the Wonder Dog, 3 March, C13:1.

Krapp' s Last Tape, 5 September, C3:1.

Largo Desolato, 26 March, C15:1.
Lillian, 17 January, C3:1.
Lily Dale, 21 November, C3:1.
Little Footsteps, 28 February, C3:1.
Long Day's Journey Into Night, 29 April, C13:2.
Loot, 19 February, C15:3.

Master Class, 6 June, C3:1.
Me and My Girl, 11 August, C13:1.
Mink on a Gold Hook, 13 May, C13:1.
The Mound Builders, 1 February, 17:4.

The Nice and the Nasty, 9 June, C19:1.

The Perfect Party, 3 April, C20:3.
The Petition, 25 April, C3:1.
Progress, 13 November, C25:1.
Precious Sons, 21 March, C3:1.
Principia Scriptoriae, 10 April, C18:3.

Rags, 22 August, C3:1.
Raggedy Ann, 17 October, C3:4.
Rich Relations, 22 April, C15:5.
Room Service, 14 February, C3:1.
Rose Cottages, 1 April, C14:1.
Rowan Atkinson at the Atkinson, 15 October, C19:4.
Rum and Coke, 28 January, C13:1.

The Second Man, 11 February, C13:1.
Sills and Company, 10 June, C17:1.
Smile, 25 November, C20:4.
So Long on Lonely Street, 4 April, C5:4.
Social Security, 18 April, C3:1.
Sunday Morning Vivisection, 13 May, C13:1.
Sweet Charity, 28 April, C19:1.

Trinity Site, 17 June, C13:5.

Uptown . . . It's Hot!, 29 January, C13:1.

Vienna: Lusthaus, 21 April, C13:1.

Wasted, 8 April, C14:4.
The Widow Claire, 18 December, C13:1.
Wild Honey, 19 December, C3:1.
The Worker's Life, 13 May, C13:1.
Wrestlers, 15 April, C14:3.

You Never Can Tell, 10 October, C3:1.

1987 — (59 reviews)

All My Sons, 23 April, C22:3.
Anything Goes, 20 October, C17:1.

Barbara Cook: A Concert for the Theater, 16 April, C19:1.
Blithe Spirit, 1 April, C24:5.
Bloody Poetry, 7 January, C18:3.
Bouncers, 18 September, C3:4.
Breaking the Code, 16 November, C15:4.
Burn This, 15 October, C23:4.

Cabaret, 23 October, C3:1.
Clara, 9 February, C15:1.
Crime and Punishment, 9 January, C3:1.

The Day Room, 21 December, C16:1.
Death and the King's Horseman, 2 March, C13:1.
Division Street, 4 February, C24:3.
Dreamgirls, 29 June, C14:5.

El Salvador, 9 October, C3:1.

Fences, 27 March, C3:1.
Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune, 28 October, C23:4.

Holy Ghosts, 12 August, C17:4.
House Arrest, 20 November, C3:1.
The Hunger Artist, 27 February, C3:1.
Hunting Cockroaches, 4 March, C24:3.

I Can't Remember Anything, 9 February, C15:1.
Into the Woods, 6 November, C5:1.

King Richard II, 10 July, C3:1.
The Knife, 11 March, C22:5.

Laughing Wild, 12 November, C23:5.
Les Misérables, 13 March, C1:1.
Les Liaisons Dangereuses, 1 May, C5:1.
Little Murders, 7 May, C22:5.
The Lucky Spot, 29 April, C22:1.

The Maderati, 20 February, C3:1.
The Mahabharata, 19 October, C15:1.

Manny and Jake, 6 April, C13:1.
Me and My Girl, 29 September, C19:1.
Medea, 9 November, C20:1.
A Month of Sundays, 17 April, C3:1.
Moonchildren, 8 December, C24:1.

The Nerd, 23 March, C16:1.

On Tidy Endings, 6 April, C13:1.
Overture to the Fourth Act of Deafman Glance, 20 July, C16:1.

The Piano Lesson, 10 December, C25:4.
A Place With the Pigs, 3 April, C3:1.
La Puta Vida Trilogy—This Bitch of a Life, 25 November, C20:1.
Pygmalion, 27 April, C12:1.

Real Estate, 2 December, C20:3.
The Rover, 27 July, C18:1.
Roza, 2 October, C3:1.

Safe Sex, 6 April, C13:1.
Sarafinal, 26 October, C15:1.
Sarcophagus, 22 September, C12:5.
Self Defense, 29 January, C24:5.
Serious Money, 4 December, C3:1.
Sherlock's Last Case, 21 August, C3:1.
Sleight of Hand, 4 May, C16:1.
Starlight Express, 16 March, C17:1.
Stepping Out, 12 January, C18:3.

Teddy and Alice, 13 November, C3:1.
Two Gentlemen of Verona, 31 July, C3:1.

1988 — (57 Reviews)

Ah, Wilderness!, 24 June, C3:1.
Ain't Misbehavin, 16 August, C15:3.
Another Antigone, 15 January, C3:1.

Big Time: Scenes from a Service Economy, 18 July, C11:1.
Borderline, 8 April, C3:1.
Boy's Life, 1 March, C13:4.

Cafe Crown, 26 October, C19:1.
Carrie, 13 May, C3:1.
Checkmates, 5 August, C3:5.
The Cherry Orchard, 25 January, C15:1.
Chess, 29 April, C3:1.
The Cocktail Hour, 21 October, C3:1.
Coriolanus, 23 November, C9:1.

The Devil's Disciple, 14 November, C13:1.

Eastern Standard, 28 October, C3:1.
Emily, 25 April, C18:1.

The Film Society, 22 July, C3:1.
Forbidden Broadway, 16 September, C3:1.

The Gospel at Colonus, 25 March, C5:1.

Italian American Reconciliation, 31 October, C15:1.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone, 28 March, C15:1.
Julius Caesar, 23 March, C17:4.
Juno and the Paycock, 22 June, C17:1.

Keepin' an Eye on Louie, 8 April, C3:1.
King John, 23 August, C15:4.

Legs Diamond, 27 December, C13:1.
Les Liaisons Dangereuses, 9 August, C15:1.
Long Day's Journey Into Night, 15 June, C21:1.
Lucky Stiff, 27 April, C22:5.

M. Butterfly, 21 March, C13:1.
Macbeth, 22 April, C3:1.
Mail, 15 April, C3:1.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, 13 January, C13:1.
Miracolo d'Amore, 30 June, C17:3.
Much Ado About Nothing, 15 July C3:1.

Our Town, 5 December, C13:1.

The Phantom of the Opera, 27 January, C19:1.

Reckless, 26 September, C19:5.
Road, 29 July, C3:1.
The Road to Mecca, 13 April, C17:1.
Romeo and Juliet, 25 May, C15:1.
Rumors, 18 November, C3:1.

Saved From Obscurity, 14 October, C3:1.
I Shall Never Return, 16 June, C21:1.
Speed-the-Plow, 4 May, C17:1.
Spoils of War, 18 May, C15:1.
Spoils of War, 11 November, C3:3.
A Streetcar Named Desire, 11 March, C3:1.

Urban Blight, 20 June, C13:3.

V&V Only, 17 June, C5:1.

Waiting for Godot, 7 November, C15:1.
A Walk in the Woods, 29 February, C15:4.
The Warrior Ant, 24 October, C11:1.
Wenceslas Square, 3 March, C29:3.
What Did He See?, 19 October, C19:1.
Woman in Mind, 18 February, C21:4.

Zero Positive, 2 June, C21:2.

1989 — (66 reviews)

All God's Dangers, 23 October, C15:3.
Amulets Against the Dragon Forces, 6 April, C17:4.
Approaching Zanzibar, 5 May, C3:1.
Aristocrats, 26 April, C15:1.
The Art of Success, 21 December, C11:1.
Artist Descending a Staircase, 1 December, C3:1.

Beside Herself, 18 October, C15:1.
Big Hotel, 29 September, C13:1.
The Birthday Party, 9 November, C21:3.
Black and Blue, 27 January, C3:1.
Born Yesterday, 30 January, C11:1.
Brilliant Traces, 6 February, C11:1.

Carnage, A Comedy, 18 September, C14:1.
The Circle, 21 November, C19:1.
City of Angels, 12 December, C19:4.
Cobb, 31 March, C3:3.
Cymbeline, 1 June 1989, C15:1.

Dalton's Back, 10 February, C3:1.
Dangerous Games, 20 October, C3:3.

Eleemosynary, 10 May, C15:3.

A Few Good Men, 16 November, C23:4.
Florida Crackers, 2 June, C3:1.
For Dear Life, 11 January, C17:1.

Ghetto, 1 May, C11:1.
Grand Hotel, 13 November, C13:3.
Gus and Al, 28 February, C17:1.
Gypsy, 17 November, C5:1.

Hyde in Hollywood, 30 November, C19:3.

In a Pig's Valise, 15 February, C15:1.

Jerome Robbin's Broadway, 27 February, C13:1.

The Lady in Question, 26 July, C17:1.
Largely New York, 2 May, C15:1.
Lend Me a Tenor, 3 March, C3:1.

A Madhouse in Goa, 27 June, C15:4.
Mastergate, 14 February, C17:1.
Mastergate, 13 October, C3:1.
Measure for Measure, 10 March, C3:1.
Meet Me in St. Louis, 3 November, C3:1.
The Merchant of Venice, 20 December, C15:1.
Metamorphosis, 7 March, C15:1.
Moon over Miami, 24 February, C3:1.
Mountain Language, 9 November, C21:3.
My Children! My Africa!, 19 December, C19:3.

Oh Calcutta, 8 August, C13:4.
Orpheus Descending, 25 September, C15:4.

The Prince of Central Park, 10 November, C3:1.

Revenger' s Comedies, 22 June, C17:1.
Romance in Hard Times, 29 December, C3:1.

The Secret Rapture, 27 October, C3:1.
Shirley Valentine, 17 February, C3:1.
Sid Caesar and Company, 2 November C19:3.
Six Characters in Search of an Author, 24 July, C13:1.
The Speed of Darkness, 9 May, C15:1.
Sweeney Todd, 15 September, C3:1.

A Tale of Two Cities, 18 January, C15:4.
Temptation, 10 April, C13:1.
The 10th Man, 11 December, C13:1.
Three Threepenny Opera, 6 November, C13:4.
Titus Andronicus, 21 August, C13:1.
Tru, 15 December, C3:1
Twelfth Night, 10 July C13:1.
Twelfth Night, 4 October, C17:1.

Welcome to the Club, 14 April, C3:1.
What the Butler Saw, 9 March, C21:1.
The Winter's Tale, 22 March, C19:4.

Yankee Dawg You Die, 15 May, C13:4.

1990 — (56 reviews)

Abundance, 31 October, C15:3.
Accomplice, 27 April, C5:1.
The American Plan, 17 December, C11:1.
Aspects of Love, 9 April, C11:1.

The Big Funk, 11 December, C15:4.
Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story, 5 November, C13:1.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, 22 March, C17:1.
The Caucasian Chalk Circle, 3 December, C13:3.
The Cemetery Club, 16 May, C14:4.
The Colorado Catechism, 22 October, C13:1.
Crowbar, 14 March, C13:4.

Each Day Dies With Sleep, 17 May, C20:3.
Elliot Loves, 8 June, C3:1.
Endangered Species, 9 October, C13:1.

Falsettoland, 29 June, C3:1.
The Fever, 29 November, C17:1.

Grapes of Wrath, 23 March, C1:4.
Gypsy, 18 September, C11:1.

Hamlet, 9 May, C15:4.

Ice Cream With Hot Fudge, 4 May, C5:1.
The Iceman Cometh, 3 October, C13:4.
Imagining Brad, 7 February, C15:2.
Ivanov, 25 September, C13:3.

Kiss of the Spider Woman, 1 June, C3:1.

Lake No Bottom, 30 November, C3:1.
Lear, 26 January, C3:1.
Lettice and Lovage, 26 March, C11:1.
Love Diatribe, 19 December, C15:1.

Macbeth, 17 January, C13:4.
Machinal, 16 October, C13:1.
The Merry Wives of Windsor, 30 May, C13:1.
The Miser, 12 October, C1:1.
Monster in a Box, 15 November, C19:1.

Oh, Kay!, 2 November, C1:1.
Once on This Island, 7 May, C11:1.

Pal Joey, 24 July, C13:3.
Paradise for the Worried, 6 April, C3:1.
The Piano Lesson, 17 April, C13:4.
Prelude to a Kiss, 15 March, C15:1.
Prelude to a Kiss, 2 May, C15:1.
Price of Fame, 14 June, C17:1.
Prin, 7 June, C18:5.

Search and Destroy, 14 December, C3:1.
Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, 9 February, C3:1.
Shadowlands, 12 November, C11:1.
Shogun: The Musical, 21 November, C9:1.
Six Degrees of Separation, 15 June, C1:2.
Six Degrees of Separation, 9 November, C5:1.
Spunk, 19 April, C17:4.
Square One, 23 February, C3:1.
Stand-Up Tragedy, 5 October, C3:1.

The Taming of the Shrew, 13 July, C3:1.

The Voysey Inheritance, 26 October, C3:1.

When She Danced, 20 February, C15:1.
The Winter' s Tale, 31 January, C15:

Zoya's Apartment, 11 May, C3:1.

1991 — (52 reviews)

And the World Goes Round: The Songs of Kander and Ebb, 19 March 91, C11:2.
Absent Friends, 13 February 91, C13:3.
Assassins, 28 January 91, C19:3.

The Baby Dance, 18 October 91, C5:1.
Babylon Gardens, 9 October 91, C17:1.
The Balcony Scene, 1 July 91, C9:1.
Beggars in the House of Plenty, 24 October 91, C17:4.
Black Eagles, 22 April 91, C13:1.
The Big Love, 4 March 91, C11:1.
Breaking Legs, 20 May 91, C11:1.
A Bright Room Called Day, 8 January 91, C11:1.

Casanova, 29 May 91, C11:5.
The Crucible, 11 December 91, C17:1.

Dancing at Lughnasa, 25 October 91, C1:4.
Dead Mother; or Shirley Not All in Vain, 1 February, C3:1.

Earthly Possessions, 4 September 91, C13:2.

From the Mississippi Delta, 12 November 91, C13:1.

The Good Times Are Killing Me, 19 April 91, C3:1.

Henry IV, Parts 1&2, 28 February 91, C15:1.
The Homecoming, 28 October 91, C13:1.

I Hate Hamlet, 9 April 91, C13:3.
In the Jungle of the Cities, 6 November 91, C19:2.

La Bete, 11 February 91, C11:3.
Life During Wartime, 6 March 91, C13:1.
Lips Together, Teeth Apart, 26 June 91, C11:1.
Lost in Yonkers, 22 February 91, C1:4.
Lucifer's Child, 5 April 91, C1:1.

Mad Forest, 5 December 91, C15:3.
March of the Falsettos and *Falsettoland*, 15 October 91, C13:1.
Marvin' s Room, 6 December 91, C1:5.
Miss Saigon, 12 April 91, C1:2.
The Most Happy Fella, 30 May 91, C13:1.

Nick and Nora, 9 December 91, C11:3.

The Old Boy, 6 May 91, C11:4.
On Borrowed Time, 10 October 91, C19:1.
Our Country's Good, 30 April 91, C13:4.
Othello, 28 June 91, C1:1.

Park Your Car in Harvard Yard, 8 November 91, C1:4.
Pericles, 25 November 91, C13:1.
A Piece of My Heart, 4 November 91, C15:1.

Road to Nirvana, 8 March 91, C1:1.
The Rose Quartet, 18 December 91, C23:1.

The Secret Garden, 26 April 91, C1:1.
The Speed of Darkness, 1 March 91, C1:1.
The Stick Wife, 10 May 91, C4:3.
States of Shock, 17 May 91, C1:3.
The Subject Was Roses, 6 June 91, C13:2.
The Substance of Fire, 18 March 91, C11:1.

Taking Steps, 21 February 91, C13:1.
The Time of Your Life, 2 October 91, C17:1.

The White Rose, 30 October 91, C15:1.
The Will Rogers Follies, 2 May 91, C17:1.

1992 — (47 reviews)

Angels in America: Millennium Approaches and *Perestroika*, 10 November, C15:3.

The Baltimore Waltz, 12 February, C15:3.
Before It Hits Home, 11 March, C17:2.
Boesman and Lena, 30 January, C15:1.
Brother Truckers, 22 September, C13:3.

Conversations With My Father, 30 March, C11:3.
Crazy for You, 20 February, C15:3.
Crazy He Calls Me, 28 January, C11:1.

Death and the Maiden, 18 March, C15:4.
The Destiny of Me, 21 October, C15:1.

The End of the Day, 8 April, C17:3.
The Extra Man, 20 May, C15:4.

Falsettos, 30 April, C17:3.
Fires in the Mirror, 15 May, C1:1.
Five Guys Named Moe, 9 April, C17:2.
Four Baboons Adoring the Sun, 19 March, C15:3.

Grandchild of Kings, 17 February, C13:1.
Guys and Dolls, 15 April, C15:3.

The Holy Terror, 9 October, C3:1.

Jake's Women, 25 March, C17:3.
Jelly's Last Jam, 27 April, C11:1.

Les Atrides, 6 October, C11:3.
A Little Hotel on the Side, 27 January, C17:1.

Mad Forest, 2 October, C5:1.
Marvin's Room, 6 March, C3:1.
The Master Builder, 20 March, C3:1.
Metro, 17 April, C1:3.
The Most Happy Fella, 14 February, C1:4.
My Favorite Year, 11 December, C1:!.

Oleanna, 26 October, C11:4.
Once Removed, 7 December, C11:1.

Private Lives, 21 February, C1:1.

Richard III, 12 June, C1:1.
The Roads to Home, 18 September, C2:3.
Roy Cohn/Jack Smith, 15 May, C1:1.

The Seagull, 30 November, C11:1.
Shimada, 24 April, C1:1.
Sight Unseen, 21 January, C13:3.
A Small Family Business, 28 April, C13:3.
Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, 24 November, C13:4.
Spic-o-Rama, 28 October, C13:3.
Spike Heels, 5 June, C3:1.
A Streetcar Named Desire, 13 April, C11:3.

'Tis Pity She's a Whore, 6 April, C11:2.
Two Shakespearean Actors, 17 January, C1:1.
Two Trains Running, 14 April, C13:4.

The Visit, 24 January, C1:2.

1993 — (38 reviews)

Angels in America: Millennium Approaches, 5 May, C15:3.
Angels in America: Perestroika, 24 November, C11:5.
Anna Christie, 15 January, C1:1.
Aven' U Boys, 9 March, C13:3.

Blood Brothers, 26 April, C11:3.
Blown Sideways Through Life, 22 September, C13:5.

The Fiery Furnace, 6 October, C15:4.
Fool Moon, 26 February, C1:1.
Four Dogs and a Bone, 1 November, C13:3.

The Goodbye Girl, 5 March, C1:1.

How to Write a Play, 9 November, C17:3.

In the Summer House, 2 August, C11:3.
In Persons, 1 October, C3:1.

The Kentucky Cycle, 15 November, C13:3.
Kiss of the Spider Woman, 4 May, C15:4.

Later Life, 24 May, C11:1.
Laughter on the 23d Floor, 23 November, C13:3.
The Lights, 4 November, C17:1.

The Madness of George III, 17 September, C1:3.
Marisol, 21 May, C3:1.
Measure for Measure, 19 July, C11:3.

On the Open Road, 17 February, C13:1.
One Shoe Off, 16 April, C3:1.

A Perfect Ganish, 23 June, C11:4.
Playboy of the West Indies, 10 May, C11:3.
Playland, 9 June, C15:3.
Putting It Together, 2 April, C1:1.

Redwood Curtain, 31 March, C15:3.

She Loves Me, 11 June, C1:1.
She Loves Me, 8 October, C20:1.
Show Boat, 20 October, C15:4.

The Song of Jacob Zulu, 25 March, C17:3.
Sophistry, 12 October, C15:1.

Three Hotels, 7 April, C13:4.
Tommy, 23 April, C1:1.

Wings, 10 March, C13:3.
Wonderful Tennessee, 25 October, C13:3.
Wrong Turn at Lungfish, 22 February, C11:1.