HOBE MORRISON AND THE THEATRE OF BROADWAY

by

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ABSTRACT

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This study analyzes the critical views of Hobe Morrison, Broadway reviewer for Variety for more than thirty years. In the Introduction, the purpose and scope of the study are discussed. The second chapter, "Background and Development," describes Morrison's evolution as a critic with attention to those who helped shape his attitudes towards his profession. Chapter III, "How He Defines His Work," details his ideas on the nature and function of reviewing. Chapter IV, "His Views on Other Critics," is a critique of his profession and Chapter V, "His Criteria for Commercial Success," analyzes the methods he uses to judge such varied elements as playwriting, acting, directing, set design and lighting. Chapters VI and VII concentrate on his attitudes toward contemporary movements within the theatre and his defense of traditional Broadway values. Chapter VIII is a survey of readers' perceptions of his work. Chapter IX concludes the study.

The dissertation reveals Hobe Morrison as a forthright, knowledgeable reviewer of great integrity who has been acclaimed by Brooks Atkinson as "the soundest critic of plays in New York." Although his reviews have no effect on

prolonging a show's run, his readers find them valuable because he writes as one theatre professional to another. Morrison is not without prejudices. He dislikes most of what is considered experimental or avant-garde, preferring the traditional Broadway fare of musicals, comedies and "uplifting" drama. His biases not only reflect those of his readers but also represent the middle class tastes of Broadway audiences. Although he writes for a trade paper, he believes a successful season cannot be measured by box-office receipts but rather by the number of artistic works of quality that are produced. He remains the guardian and foremost proponent of the theatre of Broadway.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION

It has been said that the Broadway theatre is the American theatre of record because of its luminous history, prestige and universal recognition.

> It is the home base of our theatrical establishment and the mainstream of our theatrical evolution . . . it was Broadway and Broadway alone that created the American theatre . . . it will be Broadway that audiences and theatre people will look to for contemporary American theatre--Broadway that time will regard . . . as the theatre of this period. It is only in the recognition of that reality that a true picture of modern theatre in the United States can be realized.[1]

Francis Fergusson concurs: "Broadway is the most constant element in our theatre's life--the 'normal' place of that art with us."[2]

Given the centrality of Broadway to our theatre life, it is no coincidence that this work is entitled "Hobe Morrison and the Theatre of Broadway." Few people have observed the Broadway theatre more closely and consistently than has Hobe Morrison, Variety's drama editor and "Legit," i.e. Broadway reviewer for nearly a generation. He has

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[1]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided: The Postwar American Stage (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), p. 29.

[2]Francis Fergusson, "Broadway," The American Theatre: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 104.

been heralded as "the soundest theatre critic on any newspaper"[3] by no less a personage than Brooks Atkinson and yet is practically unknown to the general public.

Who is Hobe Morrison? What are his critical views about theatre? What significance do they have? In what ways do his attitudes reflect his times, the theatre, or the man? These are some of the questions this paper will attempt to answer.

Hobe Morrison has been the Broadway critic for Variety for more than a quarter century. In addition to Variety, he has written a syndicated column for several general readership papers over the years. Presently a member of the prestigious Drama Critics' Circle, he has been writing theatre reviews and has been a professional observer of our theatre life for over forty years, a record unique for its longevity.

Oddly enough, little has been written about Morrison as theatre critic. He is conspicuously absent from most studies on New York critics that I have read. I can only conjecture, at this point, that the lack of material on Morrison is due to the fact that the trade-oriented Variety, the periodical with which he is most closely associated, lacks the scholarly attraction that the New York Times, for example, holds for theatre researchers. I believe Morrison has been the victim of a form of academic snobbery, which

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[3]Personal letter from Brooks Atkinson, April 11, 1974.

relegates writers on non-literary oriented journals to intellectual obscurity, regardless of their merit.

Only two books deal with Variety. They are The Spice of Variety, edited by Abel Green and Dayton Stoddart's Lord Broadway: Variety's Sime. They are superficial works which provide little information about Morrison. Rather, they give some background material on the milieu in which he has worked for so many years. I hope this study will help to remedy the situation.

* * *

This dissertation is the product of my having read and categorized nearly 6,000 of Morrison's reviews and columns as they appeared in the Philadelphia Record, the Bergen Record, the Herald News and Variety, as well as my conducting nearly 100 hours of interviews with Morrison and people who are familiar with his work. In addition, several publications proved to be particularly useful. Martin Gottfried's A Theatre Divided; The Postwar American Stage offers an interesting theoretical basis for viewing traditional and non-traditional theatre, while William Goldman's The Season; A Candid Look at Broadway has illuminating insights on the pragmatic aspects of Broadway. Duncan Williams' The Trousered Ape; Sick Literature in a Sick Society, together with Sean O'Casey's "The Bald Primaqueera" comprise a "conservative manifesto" for the arts. For contrasting opinions Robert Brustein's Seasons of

Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959-1965, Francis Fergusson's "Broadway" and Jack Richardson's "Reviewing Plays" were especially valuable. Harold Clurman's The Fervent Years; The Story of the Group Theatre and the Thirties, and Brooks Atkinson's Broadway were helpful in understanding relevant background material. Dissertations of special significance were Jerry McNeely's "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," Mark Allen Schoenberg's "The Dramatic Criticism of Richard Watts," and Will Grant, Jr.'s "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969: A Study of the Critical Bias and the Critical Methodology of Selected American Theatrical Critics."

Although it is at times very difficult to separate Morrison's critical function from those of editor and reporter, his editorial and reportorial duties are discussed only insofar as they affect his responsibilities as a reviewer.

This paper is divided into nine chapters. The Introduction discusses the purpose and scope of the study. Chapter II, "Background and Development," describes Morrison's evolution as a critic. Chapter III, "How He Defines His Work," details his ideas on the nature and function of reviewing. Chapter IV, "His Views on Other Critics," is a critique of his profession and Chapter V, "His Criteria for Commercial Success," analyzes the methods he uses to judge such varied elements as playwriting, acting, directing, set design and lighting. Chapters VI and VII concentrate on his attitudes toward contemporary movements within the

theatre and his defense of traditional Broadway values. The next chapter surveys readers' perceptions of his work and the final chapter concludes the study.

* * *

Morrison has written "Everyone tends to repeat himself. Our lives are largely endless reiterations of a pattern. That's as true of artists--including playwrights, actors and directors--as it is of prosaic mortals."[4] It is the aim of this paper to reveal Morrison's patterns of critical thought.

He has also written: "Almost everyone cares desperately about what others think of him."[5] I can only hope, therefore, that such evaluations will add to the objective record of his career.

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[4]Bergen Record, May 2, 1964, p. 16.

[5]Herald News, October 1, 1972, p. 26.

CHAPTER II:

BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

What sort of a person is the man William Goldman, author of The Season; A Candid Look at Broadway called "one of the best critics we have"?[1] In what ways is he a product of his times? What helped to make him the way he is?

On March 24, 1978, Hobe Morrison celebrated his 74th birthday. It was in 1934 that he had begun his career as a second string drama critic for the Philadelphia Record. In that period America had successfully fought two world wars and two regional wars, suffered a great economic depression, yet survived to become one of the world's wealthiest nations. When Morrison was born, the automobile was a rare sight in any city. When Morrison was young, the ideas of Marx, Freud and Einstein had yet to re-shape the world. In 1904, the American theatre was still in its infancy. Within fifty years it became a major world theatre.

Hobe Morrison, the youngest of five children, was born March 24, 1904 in Germantown, Pennsylvania. Morrison was not baptised with the name of "Hobe." To this day he refuses to reveal the name he was born with. Hobe was a nickname, or a name of endearment, that was "born" a short time after Morrison. At the age of one Morrison was

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[1]William Goldman, The Season; A Candid Look at Broadway (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1969), p. 101.

apparently a happy child who laughed a lot. His father called him "sobersides," an ironic comment on his son's "laughing" behavior. When Morrison tried to imitate the word it came out sounding like "Obey-eyed," and his parents called him Hobe, after the sound they heard. Many years later, during the Second World War, Morrison legalized the name. At first, the judge who heard Morrison's appeal was reluctant to legalize the change; Morrison's name was the same as that of the judge. However, when the judge was informed that Morrison was a newspaperman, he permitted the change "for professional reasons."[2]

Morrison's parents were of Scotch-Irish working class stock, and although Morrison's maternal grandfather had been a civil engineer, most of the family had worked as tradesmen or shopkeepers. Morrison's father, a self-educated man, had become an accountant for a Pennsylvania railroad several years after beginning there as a clerk. His father, like many others of the Morrison family, believed in the Protestant work ethic. Hobe assimilated this belief and developed the ability to work hard. Circumstance played a role as well as conviction. Although his father's position had provided the family with a comfortable income, his death in 1934, after a long illness, left the family financially hard-pressed. Hobe provided for his mother and an infirm brother on the salary of a second string cub reporter. He helped support his mother for nearly ten

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[2]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, N. Y., February 21, 1974.

years, through the depression and beyond.

Morrison's devotion to the care and well-being of his mother may have had its origins in an event described in his column in the Herald News on January 26, 1972.[3] Entitled "A Theatre Buff Recalls His Mother," the column provides an insight into Morrison's relationship with his parents.

> I remember one time, when I was a very small boy, probably four or five years old. I entered my mother's room one day and found her crying. Mother didn't cry easily, and I was surprised and, I suppose, a little frightened. I put my arms around her, trying to comfort her and wondering what to say.
>
> "I wish I could go away somewhere," she said, as she blinked away the tears, "but there's nowhere I can go. I couldn't support myself--I'm not a secretary, a typist or a clerk, and I can't cook or sew well enough to make a living. I'm helpless, I have nowhere to go."
>
> Although she didn't mention why she was crying or mention father, I guess that he had said something to hurt her feelings. Father was an impatient man and sometimes said things he regretted. Mother was terribly vulnerable to unkindness, but after a while, father would feel ashamed and would abashedly make amends. Mother invariably forgave him.
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> In this instance, although I was sorry for mother, I remember that I was secretly glad that she couldn't support herself. Like any child, my main emotion was relief that she could not go away and leave us. . . .
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> Many years later . . . when I was about 30 years of age, I guess, mother and I were sitting at home one Sunday afternoon. We were listening to the Philharmonic Symphony broadcast, and I suppose she was sewing and

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[3]Herald News, January 26, 1972, p. 63. Although Morrison attributes these remarks to Rodger MacTavish, "a former actor, chronic playgoer and occasional backer," there can be little doubt that "MacTavish" is actually Hobe Morrison.

> I was looking through the papers. Suddenly I realized that it was the tenth anniversary of father's death. I mentioned the fact, and asked mother if she'd been aware of it. She nodded.
>
> "It's a strange thing," I said, "but I don't miss father any more. I never would have expected it. I loved him and admired him. I remember how devastated I was when he died, and how I was scared of what would become of us all without him."
>
> "I've gotten over all that, however. The old wound has healed and the pain is gone. I haven't forgotten him--I'll always remember him vividly and affectionately. But I no longer miss him."
>
> Mother said nothing, and after a moment or so I asked, "Do you feel that way, too, mother?"
>
> There were several seconds of silence. Then she said quietly, simply, "Ever since your father died I've been only half alive."

As a boy Morrison exhibited the spunky self-assurance that has stayed with him all his life. This characteristic may be related to the fact that he never grew taller than 5'5", a particular liability for a boy in the competitive world of Germantown, Pennsylvania. He remembers being very frightened by a bully in grade school, whom he had to fight. Although Morrison admits he got the worst of it, he did give his antagonist a bloody nose and his peers decided he had prevailed because of the amount of blood spilled by the bully. Moreover, Morrison's father was proud of his son's two black eyes, proof that he had fought back. The incident made a vivid impression on Morrison, who readily admits to recalling it in times of adversity.

The qualities that Morrison exhibited in Germantown remained with him in high school where, in spite of his size,

he was captain of his school's football and basketball teams. The same combination of aggressiveness and desire to overcome obstacles helped him in his later role as a reporter.

Morrison, like his father, is self-educated. The process began early in his life through his relationship with the Head family, neighbors of Morrison in Germantown for several years. Dr. Head, a dentist, exposed his three children to the world of ideas, literature, and the arts and he included Morrison in his various family outings. Morrison became aware of values and interests that were not available to him at home. Morrison was encouraged to read outstanding literature, and was taken to museums and concerts. In fact, his earliest memory of seeing a play places him in the company of the Head family:

> The incident occurred in Philadelphia, when the late Maude Adams was appearing at the old Broad Street Theatre with one of her several revivals of Peter Pan. The urchin was taken to a Saturday matinee by the generous and remarkably patient couple next door, in company with their three children. The group sat in a box, considered a desirable location at the time--the lower left-hand box directly next to the stage.
>
> It was all new and exciting to the young guest and he was enchanted until during a scene in the second act, one of Captain Hook's pirate crew standing only a few feet away looked at the four captivated children and gave a slight and doubtless involuntary smile. He must have been just an amateur actor but to an utterly enthralled moppet he was a fearsome monster and his smile seemed a menacing grin.
>
> The youngster was terrified, let out a shriek and scrambled to safety under his seat. There was, as the host next door later recalled, astonishment among the audience and

> consternation on stage. Efforts to reassure the small boy were unavailing, and it took several minutes to pry his clutching hands and legs from the legs of the chair and the other playgoers.
>
> As the uproar continued with the hysterical youngster continuing to scream and the frantic grownups trying to calm him, the audience began to laugh and the amusement finally overcame even the actors. The performance was, of course, brought to a standstill, but finally a semblance of order was restored, after the menacing pirate had come out of character to placate the lad.
>
> When calm again prevailed, Peter Pan himself, in the person of Maude Adams came down to the footlights and, with a briefly humorous comment, signalled the show to resume. For the rest of the performance, the overly responsive young playgoer was shifted to a chair a little further from the stage and next to a protective grownup.[4]

In retrospect Morrison writes, "Quite a few years later that impressionable theatregoer became a critic, but though he's occasionally been appalled at some of the things he's seen and heard on stage, he's never quite had to resort to screaming in horror or hiding his face."[5] About the Head family, Morrison has recently written, "The Head house was almost a second home, and the family was one of the strongest influences in my life."[6]

Morrison's formal schooling began in the public schools in and around Germantown, Pennsylvania. Lengthy schooling was not considered desirable by his family because of the need to earn a living. Morrison was unique in his family in

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[4]Bergen Record, May 6, 1966, p. 16.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Herald News, February 1, 1973, p. 40.

that he was the only one to go beyond high school, let alone enter a profession. It is interesting to note that consistent with the family belief that journalism was a poor trade with which to earn a living (and indeed it was), Morrison's father tried to discourage him from entering the field.

It was in school that Morrison's professional inclinations emerged. Generally an indifferent student, Morrison, as late as his senior year in high school had not yet decided on a career. During that year, his English teacher asked the class to write an essay entitled, "In Black and White." Morrison's response was to write a theme which began, "My ambition in life is to be in a convict's uniform."[7] The teacher, apparently impressed by Morrison's creativity, wrote, "Have you ever thought of taking up journalism?"[8] Until that day he had "never thought of taking up anything."[9]

> It was an electrifying idea and he never afterward thought about any other career for himself. That one perceptive suggestion, by a brillant teacher who cared, changed an aimless youth's life.[10]

After a series of odd jobs and continuing unemployment for over a year, Morrison enrolled in a school of journalism

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[7]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 7, 1974.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Herald News, July 8, 1969, p. 18.

in 1930. The school (which no longer exists) was sponsored by the "Poor Richard's Club of Philadelphia" and was not intended to be a rigorous training ground for aspiring young journalists. Morrison estimates that, of the approximately forty to fifty students, thirty came only to broaden their education, ten to learn something about writing and maybe three to become newspapermen.[11] The school was geared to the interests of most of the students and met only one night each week for less than a year. The "school," in fact, consisted of the one class taught by the real estate editor of the Philadelphia Enquirer.

Although Morrison admits to learning something about writing from the course, he learned about his profession, like so many of his contemporaries, by observation and imitation. The Poor Richard's School has significance in relation to Morrison only because it marked the end of his formal education.

Morrison's experiences with teaching himself had begun during his high school career with his work as sports editor for the school newspaper. He was not chosen because of any proven ability to write about sports. Rather (as has already been mentioned), Morrison had been the captain of both the football and basketball teams and somehow it was assumed by the paper's editor that "if you could play it, you could write about it." Morrison began his preparation

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[11]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 21, 1974.

by looking through the sports columns of past editions of the school paper. He was shocked to learn that the former sports editor had done the same thing. He had used the texts of past stories as models to write new ones, changing the names and dates.

The idea of studying the works of others, choosing models and attempting to emulate the style of such models was still important to Morrison in 1931 when he got his first professional newspaper job as a cub reporter for the now defunct weekly, the Germantown Bulletin at a starting salary of $1.35 per week. He began his work, as he says, "by imitating what I had seen."[12] He carefully studied the major New York and Philadelphia dailies, as well as out-of-town newspapers, such as the St. Louis Post Despatch and the Boston Chronicle for ideas and direction. In short, he read "Every famous newspaper that I had ever heard of."[13] He was a fast learner, and, less than a year later, he was working as editor at $12.50 a week.

In 1932 Morrison got a job as a "second stringer" on a major Philadelphia daily, the Philadelphia Record. The Record was a New Deal journal that was both contemporary and "lively," and major newsmen of the day contributed to it.

At first, Morrison believed that his new job was a lucky break. His father had just died after a long

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[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

illness and Morrison desperately needed the increase in salary that the Record offered in order to support his mother and brother.

However, Morrison soon had misgivings. Assigned as a second stringer to the drama desk he felt trapped in what he considered "some sort of professional backwater as the parade passed him by."[14] The word "journalism," for Morrison, up to this assignment, had conjured up images of "foreign correspondents in trench coats, famous as hell, of hard hitting, glamorous reporters like Floyd Gibbons."[15] He had read The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens only a year earlier and had contemplated a career as "a fighting, principled muckraker."[16] Reviewing second-rate movies, third-rate plays, and potpourris of cabaret acts was far from what he had in mind. "I went to work on the drama desk because I was desperate. I needed the job, but the price I had to pay was giving up any illusion of becoming a foreign correspondent."[17] Though he had seen plays, he had no strong passion for the theatre. If anything, music had been the favorite form of relaxation at home and going to a concert of Paderewski or Tchaikovski was considered a special treat.

Although Morrison knew little or nothing about reviewing,

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[14]Ibid.

[15]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 21, 1974.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

when he started at the Record, he believes that he still knew nearly as much as the drama editor, who happened to be the editor's son. According to Morrison, the Record was typical of newspapers of the time. People were not chosen for a particular specialty on the basis of background, training or interest. Rather, if the editor noticed someone not busy at the moment he would say, "Hey you, get out and cover it!" Burns Mantle, for example, was a typesetter in Chicago, who set type for Ashton Stephens, the drama critic. One day, Stephens became ill and could not cover an opening. The editor, remembering that Mantle had set type for all of Stephens' reviews rationalized, "'He sets his type. He should know what to do. Let's send him out.' That's how Mantle began as a drama critic. He was at the right place at the right time."[18]

Morrison began to learn about reviewing by once more seeking out models. "I first imitated what I had seen in everything I ever did in journalism."[19] He turned to the well known newspapers in the country, especially those in New York. Critics impressed him for different reasons. He thought Ward Morehouse very shallow in his treatment of theatre subjects, but he found another "marvellous" side to Morehouse that treated theatre as a "holy call." He appreciated Morehouse's ability to "glamorize the

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[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

theatre and make its personalities appear as gods."[20] He also found Morehouse's writing to be very readable, a quality Morrison still values today. He considered John Anderson of the New York Evening Post "brilliant, touchy and vain,"[21] and admired Anderson's humor and wit. He was taken with John Mason Brown's (New York Post) ability to cover a show, and particularly with the succinct use of space when Brown thought the show was bad.

Most of all Morrison was impressed by Brooks Atkinson. He found Atkinson's writing clear, concise in expression, and elegant in language. He further found a critical sensibility in Atkinson's reviews which was similar to his own perception of the theatre. This is not to say that both men hold precisely identical views, but rather that there are substantial similarities in their outlooks which will be discussed later.

When Morrison finally met Atkinson, they developed a friendship that has lasted over twenty-five years. Morrison's feelings about Atkinson are almost reverential:

> I've read Atkinson since my early days in Philadelphia. I've always worshipped him, always tried to write like him. Atkinson so impressed me when I started out that I was a would-be plagiarist. I would have been a plagiarist if I could. He was the one man I always tried to write like, to be like. I can't imagine

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

> such a sensational failure. Atkinson was and is the model.[22]

It is certainly consistent with Morrison's history that he should choose Atkinson, the former "dean of New York drama critics," as a model worthy of imitation. It was Thoreau, who Morrison and especially Atkinson revere, who wrote that, "imitation is the most sincere form of flattery."

Harvey Sabinson, a well-known publicist, offers a further insight into Atkinson's psychological effect on many members of the Broadway scene, including Morrison:

> Brooks seemed to all of us in the theatre as the "kindly father" all knowing. When he said you were bad, you were bad, and when he said that you were good, you were very good. I think that we all thought that way. Brooks was a father-image for all of us, including Hobe. In a way we sort of felt that Brooks was super-human. Brooks had a quiet unostentatious manner. One never saw him around that much, for example, at parties. You felt close to him and friendly with him, yet he did not move in the same circles as you.[23]

While on the Record, Morrison continued learning his craft. One reporter, David Wittels, said that news writing was only a question of knowing the correct formula for effectively organizing material. Knowing such a formula could enable one, said Wittels, to write skillfully and

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[22]Ibid.

[23]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, Queens, New York, May 6, 1974.

quickly about anything. Morrison asked Wittels to write a review about a play they had both seen using his formula, but Wittels could not do it:

> Writing reviews was a completely different kind of writing. True, a review was a type of news story, but it was concerned about the news that happens inside a reporter. You can write about it in objective terms, but essentially the information is subjective. In this kind of writing, you do not say "I was very moved," rather you write, "It was moving." You do not write, "I laughed," you write, "It was funny."[24]

Morrison also learned the art of "panning" a play. It was during this period that most of the movie houses in Philadelphia were owned by Warner Brothers. They exerted pressure on the local newspapers, by threatening to withdraw advertising if a particular film received an unfavorable review. Morrison learned from the film critic of the Record how to "pan" a film without using any negative adjectives. He would write about a film that he didn't like that it was "mildly amusing."[25] The point was made. Morrison still uses the same kind of critical statements. For his review of the musical Gigi, Morrison wrote the headline, "'Gigi' Just A Fair Musical." He described Gigi as "a moderately pleasant show, and should please a moderate portion of the public and have a moderate run."[26]

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[24]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 21, 1974.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

In addition to reviewing nightclub acts and movies, Morrison during his days at the Record, had the opportunity to review a variety of plays and musicals. Philadelphia, in the 1930's was a thriving town for theatre. It had nearly half a dozen theatres that played Broadway tryouts as well as long-run shows. The Theatre Guild alone backed eight to ten shows a year. Philadelphia, as part of the pre-Broadway tryout circuit, was host to several major productions before they reached New York. It was an ideal environment in which a young critic could develop.

In 1934, while still at the Record, Morrison started to write for Variety as Variety's Philadelphia radio and nightclub reviewer. The position, a part-time one, was offered to Morrison by an acquaintance who was leaving it. Until then Morrison had been only slightly familiar with Variety. He learned to write for Variety in the same way he had learned to write for the Record, i.e., by trial and error.

Because of continued financial pressures and his inability to get a raise at the Record, Morrison left Philadelphia to take a job as a full-time staffer for Variety in 1937. His first assignment was to report on the New York motion picture industry. At first, Morrison was overwhelmed. He had not realized that working for Variety would be so different from what he was used to. In 1937 Variety did not, with the exception of reviewers, give reporters specific assignments. Variety followed the

practice long established by its founder, Sime Silverman, of listing general assignments posted weekly by area of interest, i.e. Joe Smith, "Legit" or Tom Jones, "Radio." It was the reporter's responsibility to get the news. Abel Green, who succeeded Silverman as editor, followed his predecessor's philosophy of "Give a man an assignment and let him get started on his own." There was no city desk at Variety that coordinated assignments. It was a system, described by Variety's present editor as "permissive."[27] Under this "permissive" system, a newcomer to Variety had a very difficult time.

Morrison was no exception. He recalls that all Abel Green said to him after he was hired was, "Here's your desk."[28] According to Morrison, "They give you a desk, a telephone, paper and a typewriter and they expect you to bring in the news. It was up to you to dream up the angles and make the contacts."[29] It was a very difficult period for Morrison. Trying to get news from theatre people was not easy for him, and especially because he was viewed as an outsider. Landry notes that "Legit people tend to be clannish and hostile towards outsiders."[30] Morrison says that he wandered around, not knowing what to do or how to begin. He turned in practically no news and after a few

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[27]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

[28]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

weeks, Green told Morrison, "Things don't seem to be working out. Why don't you take the next couple of weeks off to look for another job?"[31] Fortunately for Morrison, Landry, then the editor of Variety's radio department, interceded with Green and Silverman to give Morrison some more time.[32]

Soon Morrison did develop the expertise needed to get the news with the help of two friends, Jack Gould of the New York Herald Tribune and Henry Senber of the New York Daily Telegraph. On the same day that Morrison almost lost his job at Variety, both Gould and Senber had offered to help by giving him news items, tips, and connections until he could manage on his own. Undoubtedly their aid was crucial at this stage of Morrison's career.

Abel Green, his editor at Variety, had asked him to cover the movie industry in New York, but Morrison felt ill at ease with this assignment. New York was the management center for a number of movie companies but the performance part of the industry was mainly located in California. It was the artistic, creative aspect of the business, rather than the concerns of the front office that interested Morrison. He believed that even though Variety's central focus as a trade paper was with business, it had

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[31]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[32]"Even Abel [Green] was not immune to Silverman's penchant for firing employees. To be fired at least once by Sime was par for the course. Abel made par." Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., Show Biz: from Vaude to Video (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1951), p. xix.

to be concerned with the creative aspects of the industry. Without creativity, the "business" could not endure. This idea still permeates Morrison's reviews as well as his columns. His concern for the artistic quality of a production usually takes priority over any other considerations.

While Morrison was learning to become a Broadway and movie reporter he became interested in radio. Morrison thought that radio, a major entertainment industry, was not being adequately covered. Most of the news about radio came through regular news sources such as the police, city hall and management. Morrison believed that this kind of coverage was not doing justice to this major entertainment medium. He discovered that vital information about a particular program was in the possession of the show's director, and soon, Morrison, having established a relationship with a number of directors, was privy to information not readily available to the press.

Morrison's coverage of radio and his subsequent friendship with a number of directors made him a key factor in the formation of the radio directors' union. Directors complained to him about their working conditions and Morrison suggested that they form a union. He was asked by George Zachery and Earl M. Gill, two radio directors, to arrange a meeting that all radio directors interested in forming a union might attend. Morrison was asked to set up the meeting since he knew most of the directors well enough

to insure a reasonable attendance. The meeting was a success and the Radio Directors' Guild of America was organized, with Morrison as an honorary member.[33]

Morrison continued writing for Variety until 1944, when he left for higher paying work at the advertising concern of Young and Rubicam. He stayed there for three years, but found that he was temperamentally unsuited for the business:

> I was always an awful salesman and always felt uncomfortable at selling. I'd always feel inferior and would ask myself, "Why should the customer 'buy me'?" He could get so many other people who were better and would cost him less. In addition, I never believed in the product and therefore I always felt ill at ease, as though I was trying to palm something off on him. If you don't believe in your product and you don't believe in yourself, how can you sell? Obviously I couldn't, so I quit.[34]

Robert Landry supports Morrison's contentions:

> Morrison wasn't the smooth talking agency type that's successful in fields such as advertising. He was spiritually adverse to that kind of work. Working at Variety seemed to suit his personality in that in pursuing the news, he was in a way pursuing the truth. His job was to make an issue clear, as opposed to the world of advertising, which often required that he obscure the truth and manipulate the facts.[35]

In 1944, while still working for Young and Rubicam, Morrison joined the Writer's War Board. This group, which

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[33]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

included such personalities as Dorothy Rodgers, Russell Crouse, Max Gordon, George S. Kaufman and Burns Mantle, was an outgrowth of the Author's Society of America. The purpose of the Writer's War Board (actually an unofficial branch of the Office of War Information) was to organize publicity designed to affect morale at home and overseas.

Morrison was a member of several committees concerned with movie reviewing and scripts for soldier and sailor shows, and was also chairman of the Radio Committee. He observed that the Armed Forces were using the Blue Network of N.B.C. as their primary means of reaching the American public, but that the public generally ignored the military-sponsored programs. Morrison helped introduce thirty second spots on such popular programs as "The Bob Hope Show" and the "Mary Margaret McBride Show" which boosted the number of listeners.

In 1947 Morrison returned to Variety (after an absence of three years) and resumed general reportorial duties. He was also assigned to assist Jack Pulaski, Variety's "Legit" critic. When, after a prolonged illness, Pulaski died in 1948, Morrison succeeded him as "Legit" critic and was appointed Drama Editor, a newly created position.

Pulaski had been Variety's theatre critic for years and belonged to what Robert Landry refers to as "the older generation of Variety men."[36]

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[36]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

Landry believes such men could not survive today on Variety because, "more would be expected of them than they could deliver."[37] Pulaski had only a rudimentary understanding of the literature of the theatre. It has been said of him that he thought Henry IV was an inferior play because it was filled with quotations.[38] Morrison was sent to cover Shakespearean plays because of Pulaski's inability to understand the material. Today, when, according to Variety's present editor:

> good, clear copy is expected of Variety's staffers, in addition to some sophistication with the nature of their assignments, Pulaski and his contemporaries would be outclassed. Just as many of the plays of Pulaski's era are no longer written, the kind of critics that covered those plays have also disappeared.[39]

In early 1960, Morrison's reviews began to appear on a regular basis in New Jersey's Bergen Record. In a short time, Morrison was writing columns as well. Eventually, in addition to his job at Variety, Morrison was turning out six columns a week for the Record. Morrison did not seem to consider these extra duties as strenuous. Even today Morrison remarks, "I don't consider writing columns to be

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[37]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

[38]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 21, 1974.

[39]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

work. I can complete a column, at the very most, in three hours. It usually takes me about an hour to do it--that's three pages, triple spaced."[40]

In 1968 Morrison left the Record to become resident theatre critic for the Passaic Herald News.[41] This job also entailed writing a theatre column that appeared six times a week. Carrying two full-time positions simultaneously made Morrison a very busy man. Aside from reportorial, editorial and critical responsibilities for Variety, Morrison now had the added responsibility of producing a daily column, not for a trade paper such as Variety but for a general readership paper as well. Yet somehow, throughout the years he has managed to handle both.

Although originally Variety was alarmed at having its drama editor billed as the theatre critic for another paper, reluctantly it has accepted the idea. Morrison is the only Variety staffer that has been permitted to hold another full-time position in addition to Variety. Robert Landry, the present editor-and-chief of Variety commented as late as 1974 that "Morrison writes for other papers and we don't like it. They advertise him, for example, as 'Hobe Morrison of the Record,' yet he's our critic, our Legit editor. It's embarrassing."[42]

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[40]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[41]Now known as the Herald News. Also, in 1968 Morrison's columns and reviews were syndicated in a number of Westchester County papers.

[42]Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

Probably the reason for Morrison's unique situation at Variety was more a product of circumstance than anything else. It is doubtful that many others at Variety would be prepared to take on two full-time positions. Also Morrison, because of the years that he had spent working for Variety and his prestige on Broadway as Variety's drama editor, has a position that is widely known and respected throughout the industry.

In addition, never known for its high salaries, Variety's management probably assumes it is still receiving its money's worth from its drama editor even though he is working for others. In short, by the time Variety realized that its drama editor had been co-opted, it was too late. He would have cost Variety more to replace than it was worth.

A veteran of the Broadway scene has said in this regard, "Hobe is not replaceable at Variety; not only because he knows the theatre as few men do, but also in that he actually loves the theatre. He would probably be replaced by someone who was just around."[43] A former associate of Morrison's at Variety's drama desk concurs:

> Morrison is not just another Variety critic. He is better known than any other Variety critic. Over the past twenty-five years at Variety, people throughout the Broadway industry know and respect Hobe's signature on a review and that means something.[44]

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[43]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, New York, New York, March 6, 1974.

[44]Richard Hummler, personal interview, New York, New York, May 29, 1974.

CHAPTER III:

HOW HE DEFINES HIS WORK

Throughout his long career, Hobe Morrison has often referred to himself as either a drama critic or drama reviewer. While on the staff of the drama desk of the Philadelphia Record, Morrison described himself as a reviewer. For Variety, as well as for the Bergen Record and the Herald News, Morrison often refers to himself as both. The newspapers themselves do not seem to agree on his role. To the Bergen Record he is their drama reviewer, while to the Herald News he is "our drama critic."

How different is "reviewing" from "criticism?" The dictionary provides little help; both reviewing and criticism are considered synonyms.[1] Historically, however, criticism and reviewing do show differences in perspective, purpose and practice which, while related, do differ qualitatively.

Dramatic criticism from Aristotle's Poetics to the present has been designed for a specialized educated audience. Using aesthetic principles and reasoned arguments, it is sophisticated and highly intellectual. Up to the eighteenth century, such criticism was primarily concerned with the literary rather than the performance

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[1]"Review . . . A general account or criticism of a literary work (esp. a new or recent one) either published separately or, more usually, as an article in a periodical or newspaper." The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), XIII, s.v.

value of drama, and it was not until Colley Cibber's Apology in 1740 that the art of acting, for example, received serious attention. Such a literary tradition is still in evidence today, but now there is also performance criticism.

In the United States, the beginnings of "reviewing" was coincident with the rise of the daily newspaper. When Benjamin Towne was forced by heavy advertising demands to publish his Pennsylvania Evening Post on a daily schedule in 1783, a new trend in journalism was established and soon mercantile dailies appeared in all major cities. Reviewing as we know it today seems to have a direct relationship to the establishment of the daily newspaper as a commercial venture, and is linked to the rise of the middle class as the predominant consumer of goods. Daily reviewing is aimed at a large middle-class audience who are not prepared to read a long, thoughtful treatise on the drama. The readership wants to know what happened, how, why, where it happened and whether it is worth seeing. Reviewers treat a play as a news event rather than an opportunity for involved critical discussion. They tend to be more informative than critical and evaluative and to judge drama in terms of its "commodity" value, i.e., whether or not it "pays to see." In this way, the commercial theatre and the commercial newspaper were, from the beginning, linked in the particular branch of journalism known as "reviewing." It is to this tradition that Hobe Morrison belongs.

A study in The Journalism Quarterly concludes that,

"Dramatic criticism is readily accepted as a legitimate function of the press in reporting events seeking public patronage and offering fair comment and criticism."[2] Most reviewers would probably agree with this statement. According to Brooks Atkinson, a Broadway show, "from the point of view of a newspaper is news, and good news, too, when a fine play comes along . . . It is the function of a newspaper to print the bad news as well as the good, impartially."[3] And what is the role of the newspaper critic? To Robert Coleman, "The critic is only a reporter employed to tell the readers whether this current event, this opening of a new entertainment offering, is worth the price of a seat. It is a news event in the same sense as a ballgame or a prizefight, the thousands of potential theatregoers have a right to be informed about it."[4]

Brooks Atkinson goes even further. He dislikes the use of the term, "criticism" when applied to his and others' work on newspapers.

> Probably criticism is a pompous word to apply to theatre reviewing. It should be

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[2]Margaret Laitner, Sanford Moss, Percy H. Tannenbaum, "Who Makes the Play Run?" The Journalism Quarterly XL (Summer, 1963): 53.

[3]Brooks Atkinson, "The Job of the Specialist," The Newspaper--Its Making and Its Meaning, Members of the Staff of the New York Times (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1945), p. 162.

[4]Robert Coleman, New York Journal American, September 6, 1955, p. 17 as quoted by Sidney Friedman, "Critical Standards and Assumptions in New York Daily Newspapers' Theatre Reviews, 1955-1956" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Iowa, 1966), p. 193.

> known as "reviewing." We are popularly referred to as "critics." But I have always thought that it would be much closer to the truth to describe us as "reviewers." Criticism of the drama should be a much more profound thing.[5]

Richard Watts agrees. "We who write about the theatre for the New York newspapers are essentially reviewers, rather than critics, and we may as well face it, chastening though the thought may be. We are merely the shock troops of the drama, whose duties, while ornerous, are fairly humble."[6] Morrison, himself, believes that "most critics dislike being referred to as reviewers--they consider a critic's function more exalted than mere reviewing,"[7] but, he points out, "most critics are, in fact, reviewers."[8] It is clear that "plays are public events, and public events are news and news is a newspaperman's business."[9] With this idea in mind, he wrote, "Broadway opening nights are news. They are covered not only by drama critics but also by editors, columnists, feature writers, television and radio commentators and various other categories of those who want

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[5]Brooks Atkinson, "The Job of the Specialist," p. 64.

[6]Richard Watts, "Two On the Aisle," the New York Post, October 2, 1952, p. 9, as quoted by Mark Alan Shoenberg, "The Dramatic Criticism of Richard Watts, Jr.," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 1968), p. 18.

[7]Herald News, August 3, 1974, p. 22.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Herald News, January 20, 1970, p. 36.

to be familiar with key events in the artistic world or simply are concerned with what's going on."[10]

Morrison, then, like his colleagues Atkinson and Watts, sees himself as a newspaperman who specializes in theatre, i.e., a reviewer. He believes that a critic has more time to reflect on what he says than a reviewer does. A reviewer usually writes his report the same night he sees the play. As a result the critic, in Morrison's view, is able to be more interpretive than the reviewer. His is not a report but an essay in which he considers the work from a literary as well as a performance perspective. The reviewer, on the other hand, functions as a "traffic cop,"[11] i.e., his duty is to report what he has seen and say whether he has liked it or not. Although he doesn't tell his readers to see or avoid a play, he does acknowledge that:

> If you're writing a review saying, "I liked it" or "didn't like it," you're explaining it and you're trying to convince the reader. You don't necessarily want him to agree with you and yet you want to be as persuasive in expressing your attitude as you possibly can be. And in a way that's saying, "Look, I don't like this, so stay away." That's to some extent, the effect it has, but that's a side effect that I guess is inevitable. Certainly, if you love a show, you speak about it with great praise; you're trying to sell that show. At best, you're trying to sell your point of view about it. Everything we write is doing that.[12]

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[10]Herald News, August 20, 1970, p. 20.

[11]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 21, 1974.

[12]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

On the other hand, though Morrison does see himself as a newspaperman who "covers" the theatre, he does not accept Coleman's view that "a critic is only a reporter of current events."[13] In a column appearing in the Bergen Record he writes:

> A critic is a sort of reporter, a special sort who reports facts that are subjective rather than objective and therefore intangible rather than tangible. A regular news reporter tells what happened to whom, where, when, and perhaps how and why--mostly hard, definite, and ascertainable facts. The critic tells what happened to him inwardly, emotionally, also where, when, and if possible, how and why.[14]

Morrison's position is different from Harold Clurman's. Clurman believes that "opinions are the curse of criticism. Critics," says Clurman, "should stop saying whether they like things; that's nobody's business. It's as if I were a chemist and the first thing I say about a piece of cheese is that I like it. What's important is what's in that piece of cheese."[15]

Morrison reacted to Clurman's statement by saying, "I think that's a piece of cheese. Sheer balderdash! What difference does it make what's in it. What the playwright

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[13]Robert Coleman, New York Journal American, September 6, 1955, p. 17, as quoted by Sidney Friedman in "Critical Standards and Assumptions in New York Daily Newspapers' Theatre Reviews, 1955-1956," p. 193.

[14]Bergen Record, December 21, 1965, p. 26.

[15]Harold Clurman, as quoted in "The Critic as Super-Star," Newsweek Magazine 8 (December 24, 1973): 96.

put in it has nothing to do with it. It is what comes out, that is, what we actually see and hear, that counts, and the only judge of that is the person who's out there."[16] Morrison does concede, however, that the intention of the playwright and the quality of his writing are factors to be considered in a review, but it is the effect of the whole that counts more for Morrison than the strength and weaknesses of different aspects of the production.

He also argues against Clurman's statement that "Opinions are the curse of criticism." Morrison believes that Clurman's position is "very similar to talking about objective criticism" which, according to him, is "impossible."[17] Morrison insists that it is the personal, subjective reaction of the critic that is important, that there can be no effective criticism without "opinion."

Morrison's views are shared by some other important critics. George Jean Nathan said "Impersonal criticism is like an impersonal fist-fight or an impersonal marriage, and as successful. Show me a critic without prejudices and I'll show you an arrested cretin."[18] George Bernard Shaw observed, "I never wrote an impartial line in my life."[19]

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[16]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Emory Lewis, Stages; The Fifty-Year Childhood of the American Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 218.

[19]Hobe Morrison, "Comment on Criticism," Variety, February 15, 1956, p. 66.

> It has been remarked countless times and in innumerable ways that criticism, if it's worth anything at all, must be intensely personal. All the fine critics, Shaw himself, Max Beerbohm, James Agate, Alexander Woolcott and contemporarily, Brooks Atkinson, Walter F. Kerr and London's Kenneth Tynan, for example, have been frankly, deliberately personal, subjective and even frankly prejudiced.
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> Of course, they have all liked good theatre. But being individuals, they would inevitably disagree on just what good theatre is. That's what makes them interesting. If they were impersonal (that is, reportorial) how explain their prestige, reputation and influence as individuals?
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> There persists, however, the occasional presumption that criticism should be impersonal, and impartial--the cliche word is "constructive." That thesis is most prevalent in non-show biz circles (what Mike Todd calls "civilians").
>
> But any realistic professional knows better. Any actor, author or director who gets panned knows all to well that it's personal--and just as personal for the critic as for him. He's naturally pleased with critical praise, and recognizes that it's personal too. If it were impersonal, why should he feel "gratitude"? [20]

Morrison sees himself as a reporter of personal emotional reactions rather than as a reporter of concrete facts. In so defining his function, however, he describes himself as "sort of a reporter," rather than "merely a reporter." He refers to the subjective aspects of a critic's writings:

> The point is that the essential information is subjective and highly personal, and the

[20] Ibid.

> critic is a reporter only to the extent that he accurately indicates such a response.
>
> The outstanding critics--Shaw most particularly, but also Brooks Atkinson, Kenneth Tynan and Walter Kerr--have always been the most subjective and personal and the most talented writers, of course. By no reasonable stretch of imagination could they have been classified as reporters. It has been as critics, not reporters, that they have had wide and devoted readership, have influenced the theatre and stimulated popular interest in it.[21]

In this same article Morrison further supports his position that a critic is not merely a reporter. He addresses himself to these comments of Arthur Miller, "Play reviewers are sports writers. Instead of pretending to be critics, they should report the event as a reporter does when covering an accident."[22]

Morrison notes that while Miller's theory sounds reasonable "it actually makes no sense at all."[23] He points out that if he were to follow Miller's advice, the facts about Death of a Salesman, for instance, would read that it was written by Miller, produced by Kermit Bloomgarden and Walter Fried, had scenery designed by Jo Mielziner, opened February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theatre, was directed by Elia Kazan, was in two acts and had a cast of thirteen, and that it won the Pulitzer Prize and the Critics' Circle Award and was a substantial hit.

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[21] Bergen Record, July 29, 1964, p. 69.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

The problem with such a review is obvious. The reader of the morning after review wants to know whether the play was good or not--that is whether it is worth seeing. Nowhere is this information to be found in the review.

> The best critic then, is not an objective witness who gives the tangible, impersonal details of a play, but a subjective observer who expresses his personal, emotional reaction. What he should be gifted enough to do is to express readably and clearly not the factual details of the play or even what has taken place on the stage, but what has happened inside him.
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> The skillful critic does this in terms of what has taken place onstage, of course, but he's still primarily revealing his own emotional response. Thus, when he describes a comedy as funny he's really saying that he thought it funny, and if he says a drama is tragic, it means that it had that effect on his emotions.[24]

Thus, for Morrison, criticism or reviewing is subjective; consequently, the "best critic" is an observer who expresses his personal, emotional reaction. If criticism, in the classic sense, strives for objectivity, it is Morrison's claim that reviewing does not. Richard Watts supports Morrison. The review to him is "an attempt to set down an immediate personal reaction to works opening on Broadway"; dramatic criticism is "a loftier business which strives to capture more austere artistic values."[25]

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[24]Ibid.

[25]Richard Watts, "Two on the Aisle," New York Post, August 29, 1954, quoted by Mark Alan Shoenberg in "The Dramatic Criticism of Richard Watts," p. 9.

Morrison's emphasis on the importance of subjectivity does not mean that he has no objective standards by which he judges plays--he does.[26] Nevertheless, he believes his work to be highly personalized. "You can't fool your readers. They see through everything. When you write you become very transparent and very vulnerable. Everyone sees exactly what you are and every time you write you give yourself away because everything you write is autobiographical."[27]

Sidney Friedman agrees with Morrison. In his doctoral dissertation, "Critical Standards and Assumptions in New York Daily Newspaper's Theatre Reviews, 1955-1956," he found, in analyzing the reviews of the chief critics for the then seven New York daily newspapers, that "the central fact of these critics' practice is that subjective responses dominated their reviews."[28] Not only does Morrison operate in this manner, but in addition he believes that the newspapers' readership must be advised about whether or not to see a given show.

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[26]These criteria will be discussed at length in a later section.

[27]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, December 21, 1974.

Jerry McNeely has in the same way described Brooks Atkinson's feelings about this issue: "Criticism or reviewing is, in the last analysis, personal opinion. Each time a reviewer expresses an opinion he is revealing something of himself, his tastes, prejudices, and preferences. In this sense, there is no such thing as objective criticism." Jerry McNeely, "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1956), pp. 40-41.

[28]Sidney Friedman, "Critical Standards and Assumptions in New York Daily Newspapers' Theatre Reviews, 1955-1956," pp. 156-57.

> The urgent question in the mind of almost every reader of a morning-after review is whether the show was good or not. The potential playgoer doesn't care whether the comedy is in two acts or three, or at what theatre it opened. He wants to know whether it is funny, or, in the case of a drama, whether it is moving or exciting.
>
> The reader isn't even concerned with who wrote the play or who is in it, except as such items may indicate whether it is good--that is whether it's what he'd want to pay money to see. So the vital fact about the show is what the critic thought of it--in other words, an opinion.[29]

Consonant with Morrison's opinion, Friedman found that,

> The critics' primarily subjective approach was consistent with, and perhaps an outgrowth of, their self-avowed function; both approach and function were based on the same premises. If the critic was to serve as a shopping guide for readers who wanted to know whether or not they should see a given show, then he would have to assume either that he could represent the public's preferences or that the public knew his tastes well enough to judge by a statement of his opinion whether or not they would want to see the performance. In either case, this assumption with regard to representativeness essential to the fulfilling of the shopping guide function, is precisely the assumption which the subjective critic makes when he bases evaluations on his responses. If his evaluations are to be meaningful to his readers, they must either represent the readers' tastes or tastes different from the readers' but understood by them. Thus, the shopping service function and the subjective nature of these reviewers' work go hand in hand based as they are on identical premises.[30]

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[29]Bergen Record, July 29, 1964, p. 69.

[30]Sidney Friedman, "Critical Standards and Assumptions in New York Daily Newspapers' Theatre Reviews, 1955-1965," pp. 156-57.

Although Morrison believes that "drama criticism is necessarily subjective," he is convinced that "it should primarily inform the reader about the work being covered."[31] This characteristic of Morrison's reviewing makes his newspaper reviewing different from criticism; "newspaper reviewing, though its quality has often led it closer and closer to criticism, has maintained a separate path in keeping, as its primary purpose, the informing of its news readers."[32] Will Grant, Jr., in his dissertation entitled "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969," notes a related distinction within the general area of reviewing. Using Martin Gottfried's idea of a "theatre divided," he concludes that "the reviews of the left-wing critics, by and large, evidence an intention to reform the theatre, while the reviews of the right-wing critics evidence an intention to inform their readers."[33] Morrison clearly a conservative critic, belongs in Grant's second category.

Typical of Morrison's conservative outlook is his concern for public taste, i.e., those aspects of a play that might offend a middle-class Broadway audience. "Nowadays especially," writes Morrison, there "may involve

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[31]Herald News, November 15, 1974, p. 15.

[32]Jerry McNeely, "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," p. 16.

[33]Will Grant, Jr., "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969: A Study of the Critical Bias and the Critical Methodology of Selected American Theatrical Critics" (Ph.D. Dissertation in Theatre, Cornell University, 1970), p. 11.

the suitability of the subject matter, physical action and dialogue for squeamish play-goers."[34] Morrison is referring to unnecessary obscenity, arbitrary nudity, and violence, used for the sake of sensationalism:

> Not everyone would want to impose the theme of a "Tubstrip," the dramatically arbitrary nudity of an "Equus," or the gutter language of "That Championship Season" on an uninitiated and unsuspecting aunt from back home. As to that, unless the play justifies it, as in "The Boys in the Band," visually explicit sex and "truck-driver" vocabulary may seem mere sensationalism.[35]

His reviews invariably contain admonitions concerning sex, nudity and violence when he believes they are gratuitous and not basic to a production.

Morrison's conviction that he must inform his readers about the newsworthy aspects of a production has sometimes met with resistance from the theatre community. When, in the autumn of 1964, The Owl and the Pussycat opened on Broadway with a racially mixed cast, the critics were quietly urged not to comment on that fact. Most complied, barely mentioning that the feminine role in the two-character romantic comedy was played by a black actress, Diana Sands.

Morrison did comment on that aspect of the production, while expressing a favorable opinion. He received a tele-

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[34]Herald News, November 15, 1974, p. 15.

[35]Ibid. Morrison is mistaken in his reference to "visually explicit sex" in The Boys in the Band.

phone call of protest from Frederick O'Neill, then president of Actors' Equity. O'Neill believed that by calling attention to the situation, Morrison was endangering the success of the experiment, for if the play failed at the box-office, bi-racial casting and integration generally might be hurt. O'Neill feared that a black actress cast in love scenes opposite a white actor, Alan Alda, might be considered objectionable by the white theatre-going public. According to Morrison, "that seemed a remote prospect . . . and to avoid mentioning the matter seemed a short-sighted evasion."[36] In fact, Morrison felt that "bi-racial casting might easily stir public interest and actually have the effect of stimulating business for the show. To that extent, it had the appearance of a gimmick."[37]

This is what seemed to happen. Although none of the critics thought The Owl and the Pussycat a particularly good play and not more than moderately amusing, the play did prosper sufficiently for the management to send a second company on tour with black female and white male leads. Since Morrison saw the bi-racial casting of The Owl and the Pussycat as a shrewd promotional move rather than a progressive social project, the casting "added flavor and dimension to an undistinguished comedy" and he heartily approved. He concluded with the caveat that

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[36]Bergen Record, May 25, 1965, p. 57.

[37]Ibid.

"canny promotional gimmicks shouldn't be mistaken for enlightened humanitarianism. And newspaper reporters and critics shouldn't be misled into ignoring or minimizing significant facts."[38]

Although Morrison has written that "when a critic pans a show, he should mention the fact that the audience liked it," is "poppycock--unadulterated poppycock," Morrison disregards this statement in practice.[39] More often than not he acknowledges the audience's preference in terms of their reactions--even if these veer away from his. Differing with Brooks Atkinson and Walter Kerr about the Broadway opening of The World of Suzy Wong, Morrison took the position that even though The World of Suzy Wong did not satisfy Atkinson's and Kerr's criteria for a good musical, there was an audience for such a play and therefore the obvious enjoyment of the first-night audience had to be made known.[40]

Numerous examples of this practice of Morrison's exist. In a review entitled, "Joyful Noise Is Loud But Not Tuneful," Morrison felt that the play was "less than satisfying," but believed it "only fair to report that the first-night audience seemed enthusiastic."[41] In a 1975 review of Hello Dolly, Morrison found that, "while Dolly

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[38]Ibid.

[39]Bergen Record, September 9, 1967, p. 14.

[40]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[41]Bergen Record, December 16, 1966, p. D-12.

may be back where she belongs, as the song lyrics say, she is not looking great, fellas. On the contrary, the Michael Stuart-Jerry Herman musical seems tired after several months on tour."[42] Nevertheless, "although it obviously didn't satisfy those who walked out at intermission time, it should be noted, on the other hand, that a portion of last night's audience was wildly enthusiastic, perhaps more so than even the delighted first-nighters of almost twelve years ago."[43] In his analysis of audience approval of a production that he found wanting, Morrison queried, "were they applauding and cheering their own memories, or simply irrepressible Pearl Bailey devotees?"[44] While not conceding that such patrons may have actually enjoyed the production, Morrison does admit that "they repeatedly stopped the show, in several instances giving the star standing ovations."[45]

On occasion, Morrison "pans" a show that turns out to be very popular. Morrison informs his readership of his faulty assessment, but this does not mean that he has a change of mind about the merits of the play. In his review of Cabaret, headlined, "Cabaret Lacks Quality With Vulgarity Stressed" he stated:

> Ugliness, decadence, hysteria, and moral lethargy were apparently the prevailing characteristics of Berlin on the eve of

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[42]Herald News, November 7, 1975, p. 13.

[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Ibid.

> the Nazi takeover, and they are luridly reflected in "Cabaret," the new musical which opened last night . . . The show has none of the qualities that might ordinarily be expected to attract, entertain, or satisfy an audience.

He concluded:

> It all adds up to the impression that "Cabaret" is hardly what most people would presumably pay to see.[46]

Rather than ignore this error in judgment, Morrison, in a follow-up column, acknowledged the critical and popular success of the musical:

> The trouble with drama critics--other critics, that is--is that they're unreliable. They sometimes have the effrontery to express opinions we don't share. It occasionally seems downright perverse of them.
>
> For instance, some of the other professional first-nighters enjoyed the new Broadway musical, "Cabaret," and gave it enthusiastic reviews. Most of them did, in fact. What's more, a steady line at the box office . . . since the show's opening seems to agree with them. A few fellow-curmudgeons share our negative opinion, but there's no escaping we're in the minority.[47]

Characteristically, however, he maintained his negative opinion of the show. "Are we contrite? Do we admit the error of our judgment?" He replies to both queries:

> Of course not. Even in retrospect we still dislike the musical version of the John Van Druten play, "I am a Camera,"

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Ibid.

> based on Christopher Isherwood's original Berlin Story sketches. To us it's an unpleasant show--ugly, both visually and on the basis of subject matter.[48]

Morrison came down hard on the rock musical Hair when he first saw it Off-Broadway. Morrison usually does not review Off-Broadway shows, but went to see Hair a week or two after the opening because of the "enthusiastic tone of the reviews."[49] In spite of the generally favorable press, Morrison found the Papp production "juvenile."[50] He believed that the unusual score was weak because it lacked "definable tunes," although he found that "the lyrics of one number are fair enough . . . As for the book, staging, and performance," Morrison observed, "they smack of high school theatricals. And I can't work up much jubilation over the deliberately repeated use of waterfront language on the stage."[51] Morrison thought so little of the production that he devoted nearly a third of his column to praise of the newly opened Anspacher Theatre, which, unlike the production, he found "unusual and stunning."[52]

When Hair later opened on Broadway, Morrison still thought it was a "no-talent put-on, and the nude scene was a fraud on a gullible public."[53] Still later, however, Morrison acknowledged that Hair was a smash hit that "made everybody else happy." He wrote:

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[48]Ibid.

[49]Bergen Record, December 5, 1967, p. D-11.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Bergen Record, January 15, 1969, p. 44.

> There's going to be a Chicago company of "Hair." That will be in addition to the Broadway, Los Angeles, London, Paris and Australian versions, plus productions scheduled for San Francisco and Las Vegas. It's been a hit everywhere it's been done. The original Broadway production, revised and transferred from Off-Broadway, has been a sellout since its opening fourteen months ago.
>
> My reaction at the premier at the Biltmore Theatre was not much beyond mild interest. There have been invitations to go back for another look, in the expectation that a repeat visit would bring a change of opinion. It has seemed foolish to see the musical again, however, for the reaction would probably be the same as the first time--and why beat up a show that makes everyone else happy?[54]

Morrison firmly believes that he must be true to his own convictions and publicly stand by them.[55] One of the hallmarks of his career has been a commitment to principles that have altered little over the years. It is not unusual to find Morrison at odds with what he considers the fashionable play of the moment. Such a play might be commercially successful, but lack artistic value. "The point about a play or a book, movie, ballet or other artistic effort is its quality, not whether it's in the fashion of the minute. Some of our greatest stage plays, novels, films and ballets are classics that have outlived changes in style."[56] He continues, "Most of the stuff that was turned out in the

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[54]Bergen Record, June 27, 1969, p. 24.

[55]In a later chapter Morrison's critical principles that are violated by plays like Hair and Cabaret will be discussed at length.

[56]Herald News, January 30, 1975, p. 40.

past is junk, and I suspect it always was. Similarly, most of the ultra-modern stuff of today is utter trash. The 'good' old fashioned work has survived and the 'good' new fashioned material will too." He concludes:

> Many, if not most of today's books, plays and films use pornography and obscenity to attract immediate attention. However, they lack the elements of quality that make lasting or even temporary success. Does anyone seriously argue that today's new musicals are better because their songs are instantly forgettable?
>
> It is natural for today's writing to reflect the ugliness, degradation and despair of contemporary life. But to mistake such pieces as worthwhile art is like trying to emulate George Washington by having false teeth.[57]

Ironically, the column in which the above words appear is entitled, "Why is 'Old Fashioned' So Lethal?"[58]

Although Morrison's honesty and commitment to his principles and taste may be viewed as laudable, many of Morrison's "minority negative opinions" pertain to productions that are unconventional or avant-garde. This is not to say that Morrison's opinions of such plays are always "minority opinions." In fact, they are not. However, Morrison does display a consistent animus to such plays.

As we have seen, Morrison believes that a major function of his role as a reviewer is to provide a judgment as to whether a play will attract audiences. Even though he may

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[57]Ibid.

[58]Ibid.

dislike a show, he will acknowledge the possibility that it may succeed with the public. This concept is particularly significant in a trade journal such as Variety. Variety specializes in the theatre as a business, and its drama reviewer has a special role in estimating the potential box office appeal of a Broadway show. In Variety, Morrison is writing as a specialist for people who have a special interest in the business of theatre. Such an involvement with a trade weekly sets him apart from many of the other reviewers: "Regardless of what other feelings of responsibility they may have for the theatre, most reviewers vociferously deny any but the most inadvertant relationship to the financial side of the drama."[59] Atkinson believes that "the critic must ignore the business of the theatre completely, in order to have any value to his readers."[60]

Such an attitude for a reviewer working in New York is questionable, particularly when the reviewer is working for the New York Times. As Newsweek magazine noted in a special report on the role of the critics, "It's not easy to maintain critical distance and objectivity in a world where it's sometimes difficult to tell an aesthetic point from a commercial or political one. What Clive Barnes says determines the economics of the American theatre."[61]

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[59]Jerry McNeely, "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," p. 42.

[60]Ibid., p. 43.

[61]Barbara Rose, "The Critic as Superstar," Newsweek 8 (December 24, 1973): 98.

Morrison, unlike Atkinson, does not believe that the business of the theatre is not the business of the critic. He vigorously maintains that the Broadway theatre is at the heart of the American theatre experience and that experience has a profound commercial base.

At Variety, Morrison sees himself, in part, as an interpreter of the theatre's commercial roots. He views this aspect of his work as conforming to the distinctive personality of Variety where, the business of show business is Variety's "angle." Morrison does not agree that Variety's concern with commerce diminishes its role. On the contrary he sees Variety's particular voice as adding to the broad spectrum of theatre opinion. "All daily papers say if a play is good or not. They read Variety to see if it's going to succeed or not."[62] In an interview Morrison discussed Variety's commercial orientation:

> Many people do not seem to understand that Variety is a trade paper. We write about the commercial theatre, the professional theatre and one of our concerns is, "is it going to be successful?"
>
> I am not interested in attempts to change the art, or in new techniques in experimental theatre, or in experimental criticism. I do not believe that is what our readers are interested in. I think they are professionals and want to see the theatre reviewed from a professional point of view. Our readers are interested in whether or not a play can succeed at the box office.
>
> Now, granted that this is a special point of view, but I see no reason why a publication

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[62]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

> that has a special point of view should not be allowed to publish. There are those who would review the theatre as "pure art" (if anyone can define that). And Variety's point of view to these types is a bit vulgar. Some years ago, there was a Communist daily called The New Masses. It reviewed everything on whether or not it conformed to Communist dogma. I disagreed with their standards. I was not interested in that point of view. I did not, however, quarrel with their right to publish their opinions. Everyone has their own special scale of values, and Variety's incorporates a pragmatic, hardboiled attitude toward the theatre.[63]

What is also clear from the above discussion is Morrison's conservative critical posture. Morrison truly believes that his readers do not want the Broadway theatre to change and that they do not want him to promote change. For Morrison, the "professional point of view" is the conservative point of view, which is, in fact, the outlook of many Broadway producers. This "pragmatic, hardboiled" attitude toward the theatre, however consonant it may be with the reality of Broadway, is strictly a minority opinion and is out of keeping with the broader spectrum of American critical opinion that is "left-wing, i.e. liberal moving toward change and involved with the new."[64] Indeed, the perspective in which we view Morrison's work can never be clear unless we realize that:

> In our time the dominant belief-makers are the left-wing critics. Our climate of opinion has been and continues to be

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[63]Ibid.

[64]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 3.

> dominated by left-wing critical thought. Let me name a few names: James Gibbons Hunecker, Stark Young, George Jean Nathan, Mary McCarthy, Robert Brustein, Kenneth Tynan and Richard Scheckner. My point is even clearer if I name publications: The Drama Review, the Saturday Review, the Nation, the Hudson Review and the New Republic. The New York paper that devotes more space to theatrical reviewing than any other is the Village Voice. . . . the only publication which represents right-wing criticism is Variety, hardly more than a trade journal and not read in general by the public. Thus, in the world of theatrical criticism, the left-wing is the establishment and the right-wing is the minority. Our climate of opinion, in matters of things theatrical, is one that accepts the beliefs and habits of mind that characterize left-wing thinking. . . . If the professional Broadway theatre is the establishment for play production in our time, then the establishment of theatrical criticism is the left-wing, which opposes most of the values for which the professional, commercial theatre stands. This relationship is an important, and dominant problem in the world of theatrical criticism.[65]

In light of this paradox, during the period of the late sixties, Morrison was perceived more than ever by a Broadway under attack, as a critic who represented the Broadway view of what constitutes "good" theatre. To Broadway, Morrison was now "a thoroughly objective critic" in that unlike so many "left" critics, "he did not see himself as a defender or shaper of public tastes. He did not "try to impose his own taste on plays."[66] He likes to:

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[65]Will Grant, Jr. "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969," p. 242.

[66]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, New York, New York, March 6, 1976.

> interpret what the creative people have done and assess if they have achieved their intention. Even though one of Morrison's functions is to try to predict success or failure, you find that he goes in saying, "let me see what you're going to show me." He does not say, "I hope you're going to show me something I want to see," before he even goes into the theatre. Too often, too many critics try to force certain kinds of plays on the public.[67]

In short, Morrison's readers believe that "he is in touch with the average Broadway audience and seems to know what they will like."[68] He is certainly not, as Jack Schlissel says, "far out."[69] Morrison's readership gets a "general middle-class audience opinion of the play."[70] This is important because "the Broadway theatre is almost entirely occupied by right-wing plays and right-wing audiences."[71]

Morrison, however, does make a careful distinction between what he thinks is the box-office appeal of a play and its inherent artistic quality. It is not unusual for him to find a play poor in quality, but excellent in box

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[67]Morton Gottleib, personal interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[68]Jack Schlissel, personal interview, New York, New York, March 21, 1974.

[69]Ibid.

[70]William Talbot, personal interview, New York, New York, March 4, 1974.

[71]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 55.

office appeal or vice versa. "In general, however, most observers think of the relative level of a theatre season in terms of good shows--that is, in terms of quality,"[72] He adds, "The point is that if only relatively few shows were produced but twenty were outstanding it would be the most exciting theatre season in a generation, if not in history. On the same basis, it's possible that none of the authors and composers of the theatre will have notable shows--they might all be flops. In that case it would, indeed, be the worst season in memory."[73]

While discussing an "anti-critical tirade" by Frank Yablans, the president of Paramount Pictures, who was enraged by the notices of his movie, The Great Gatsby, Morrison observed that Yablans had responded to his critics with the claim that "the picture will make money anyway,"[74] He noted, "What's that have to do with its quality?"[75] Morrison judges the success of a theatre season, not in terms of box office receipts or the number of productions, but rather in terms of artistic quality.

> I do not believe that a show's worth is entirely measured by its box office. If that were true, Sean O'Casey would have died years ago as an obscure, unknown author. The fact is that his plays are continually being done, although he never had a commercial hit. Nevertheless, he

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[72]Herald News, September 51, 1971, p. 40.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Herald News, July 20, 1974, p. 23.

[75]Ibid.

> is a famous playwright and I think correctly so because he has written important and enduring works.[76]

Although Morrison recognizes the importance of quality in a production, he believes that there is a close relationship between artistic values and commercial appeal. In a column previously quoted, Morrison indicates that "plays of outstanding quality probably will enjoy financial success as a result of that quality."[77] He is convinced that the Broadway audience often recognizes good plays given good productions; that this audience, in fact, comprises the "patrons who pay" and can therefore generally, "fix a show's worth."[78] For Morrison the audience is the final arbiter of whether a play succeeds. He would agree with these words of Samuel Johnson:

> Oh! Let not Censure term our fate our choice;
> The stage but echoes back the public voice.
> The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
> For we that live to please must please to live.[79]

It is dubious whether Morrison's premise that artistic quality equals audience popularity and commercial success

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[76]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

[77]Herald News, July 15, 1971, p. 40.

[78]Bergen Record, May 6, 1965, p. 65.

[79]Samuel Johnson's Prologue spoken at the opening of the Theatre in Drury Lane in 1747 with Garrick's Epilogue, A Facsimile of the Hitherto Undiscovered First Edition (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1902).

is true. The plays of Sean O'Casey, mentioned earlier, are examples of this fallacy. At times, Morrison's logic can be used in an analysis of some outstanding Broadway successes, but how does it account for theatrical mediocrities that have enormous staying power on Broadway? Today, for example, Grease is the longest-running show on Broadway, yet it is not considered by critics an artistic triumph.

Morrison compounds his error by adding, "I don't care what kind of play it is, if it works, and it works for me if it pleases an audience. My only way," he continues, "of judging if it pleases an audience is if it pleases me."[80] Yet at times a play will please an audience but not Morrison. For example, he did not like the musical Candide, but audiences did. Responding to this inconsistency, he states, "In the case of Candide, which I did not like, I would be kidding myself and no one else, if I did not concede, quite readily, that the show is an enormous hit and it's a hit for aesthetic reasons because it gives an audience pleasure. I happen," he admits, "to be bored and irritated by it. But," he concludes, "I do not say I was wrong because I was not wrong in expressing my emotional response to that play.

"I was incorrect in terms of the box office and popular acceptance, nevertheless," he seemingly contradicts himself, "I don't think it's my function to mirror popular acceptance. If a critic," he continues, "is merely supposed to express

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[80]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

the popular point of view, you just need to take a poll first and that's not what you want."[81]

Although Morrison does not believe it is his function to "mirror popular acceptance," he assumes a play will please an audience if it pleases him and that is the problem. The fact remains that he was wrong in his belief that Candide would not please an audience. Morrison may define his role as expressing his emotional response to a play, but it is illogical for him, at the same time, to assume that his response, i.e., taste, will automatically reflect acceptance by the general audience.

Nevertheless, Morrison's "market predictions," are invariably based on his own taste and experience and are generally correct, not only because of his critical acumen, but because the odds are in his favor. According to William Goldman, "a general rule of thumb with regard to the chances of success on Broadway is the following: 5% of the shows that open each season are of such impressive quality that they have to get good notices. About 35% are so unendurable that there is no way they can survive. The remaining 60% are in the hands of the gods."[82] Out of that remaining 60%, Morrison has the good sense and practical wisdom to discern accurately the prospects of at least 50%. In past surveys of Variety (discontinued since 1951), covering the accuracy of predictions of reviewers on Broadway,

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[81]Ibid.

[82]William Goldman, The Season, p. 256.

Morrison repeatedly scored in the highest percentile.

Although many critics have taken issue with the Variety poll as an unnecessary and unfair measurement of a critic's value, Morrison himself does not believe that the function of a critic is to be "right" about a play. He did find that the Variety poll encouraged reviewers to be forthright and explicit in their opinions of a play and that it provided a gauge of the critics' ability to predict the theatrical tastes of the Broadway audience. But it was not the intent of the poll to relegate "the reviewer in his aisle seat to the status of the hoped-for customer, like the buyer at a fashion show."[83]

"Ideally, perhaps," according to Morrison, "a critic should like hit shows--that is, shows that generally appeal to an audience--and disapprove of ones that don't 'work.'" Nonetheless, Morrison recognizes that, "Perfection doesn't exist however, particularly among drama critics. On a practical basis, a critic is doing well if he's 'right' most of the time."[84]

Morrison readily acknowledges his fallibility:

> There's no formula that I have for predicting the success or failure of a show. I thought "Hair," for instance, was a mess. I was bored stiff by it. I saw it in the Village first and then on opening night on Broadway.

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[83]Francis Fergusson, "Broadway," The American Theatre: A Collection of Critical Essays, p. 101.

[84]Bergen Record, March 8, 1961, p. 18.

> Each time I thought it was junk. Yet, there was a melodrama called "The Playroom" that Kermit Bloomgarden produced that I loved. I thought it was going to be a great big smash hit. I think it ran two weeks. It was a terrible turkey. Nobody went to see it.
>
> I thought "The Cocktail Party" was a colossal bore and I said so. I was also taken aback by "The Moon is Blue." I didn't see how it could possibly succeed. On opening night I looked around and saw everybody laughing and I thought, "What are they laughing at? What is so funny?" I could not see it.[85]

For Morrison then, "the prime duty of a critic should not be to be 'right,' but to be readable, sensible, interesting and possibly stimulating. As a general rule, his judgment should be reliable, but only as a general rule--a good critic should be human, which means fallible--capable of error."[86]

Part of Morrison's concern with the business aspect of Broadway stems from his responsibility as drama editor for Variety. His duties involve (besides reviewing) reporting theatre news, rewriting out-of-town reviews when necessary, and collating weekly box office receipts. It is in his capacity as Variety's drama editor that the commercial aspects of the theatre become most significant.

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[85]Apparently no critic is immune to making bloopers. Even Morrison's idol, Brooks Atkinson proved to have his off-nights as Morrison observed, "He lavished praise on a transparently special play by Truman Capote, called 'The Grass Harp' which expired quietly after a few performances, but loathed 'The World of Suzy Wong,' which, whatever its artistic merit, vastly pleased the general public. Similarly, Atkinson liked a mediocre musical called 'By the Sea,' but scorned the enormously popular and palpably superior 'Bells Are Ringing.'" Bergen Record, March 8, 1961, p. 18.

[86]Herald News, March 9, 1972, p. 22.

Morrison is one of the best informed of any of the current Broadway reviewers about the business of the theatre. Such knowledge and expertise enables him to understand, appreciate, and articulate the ways in which the commercial milieu affects a given production. Also it permits Morrison to cover the practical aspects of a play on a day-to-day basis; he is constantly in touch with the commercial life of the theatre. In short, Morrison's role as Variety's drama editor sets him apart even further from his fellow reviewers.

It is his job as editor that illuminates an important characteristic, his basic integrity as a journalist. Morrison is constantly confronted by the fact that even the most prominent producers tend to avoid being altogether honest about the financial status of a play if such financial truth is unpleasant. On the other hand, if the box office receipts are good, then the same men tend to be remarkably forthright and honest. "The theatre is one of the few industries in America which does not supply accurate statistics on its operations to anyone, including itself."[87] It is part of Morrison's job to break this double standard and get at the truth. Morrison believes that "financial privacy has no place in the theatre. The public," he says, "has a right to know what's happening on Broadway."[88] This is especially

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[87]Stewart W. Little and Arthur Cantor, The Playmakers (New York: E. W. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 208.

[88]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

true now when most shows are financed through public offering and the financial statements of such offerings are later available to the public. If Morrison discovers that he has been given inflated figures which overstate the grosses for a given week, he has been known to retaliate by "underquoting" the play's grosses in the next issue of Variety. "At this," according to Arthur Cantor, himself a producer, "the producer who has kept a smug silence while his fake high grosses were publicized will fly into a tantrum at having his fake low grosses circulated."[89] Cantor gives the following example to illustrate his point:

> During David Merrick's early days as a producer, he feuded with Morrison on the issue of full disclosure. On one musical, "Fanny," Merrick was caught with his grosses up. Morrison then printed extra-low grosses for the show to prove that he knew what had been going on. Merrick was furious. He sent a telegram to Variety on August 8, 1955, imparting a mystical Merrickian formula to determine exact grosses of Merrick shows.
>
> > Knowing of your melancholy pre-occupation with box-office grosses and since you have been guessing the "Fanny" grosses erroneously of late, here is the way you can determine "Fanny" grosses for last week and henceforth. Whenever the average high temperature for the preceding week is 63° or less, the gross for "Fanny" is $63,000. Thereafter, the gross recedes in inverse ratio to the rise in the average high temperature for the

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[89]Little and Cantor, The Playmakers, p. 209.

> week. For example, if the average high temperature is 64° then our gross is $62,000 and if the average high temperature for the week is 75° then our gross is $51,000. This will make it easy for you and if any change in this trend occurs, I will keep you informed.
>
> Your obedient servant,
> David Merrick
>
> This was one battle Merrick could not win. In one of his rare surrenders he gave up the fight and ever since has been dutifully supplying figures that are accurate to the penny.[90]

Over the years Morrison has developed certain working habits. After the actors have taken their final curtain call one is apt to see Morrison, short, balding, with a small trim white beard, looking about ten years younger than he actually is, and dressed, in the words of a fellow critic, "in the sort of clothes worn by a football coach,"[91] hurrying toward a nearby office to write the review that he wants the California-based Daily Variety to receive in time for its next edition.[92] The Variety office is closed at this late hour, so most likely he will head toward the office of Richard Eder or, in earlier days, Eder's predecessors at the Times, Clive Barnes and Walter Kerr. Here, Morrison is able to write and call in his review within two hours.

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[90]Ibid., 209-210.

[91]Bergen Record, December 21, 1967, p. 45. John Chapman, the drama critic for the New York Daily News.

[92]Morrison wants his review in as soon as possible on the west coast so as to have it in Daily Variety before it gets into the Hollywood Reporter.

Morrison does not like to write alone; he prefers an area with lots of activity. Many authors would find this strange, but Morrison observes:

> As a newspaperman, as distinct from an author, intense concentration isn't essential for my so-called work. Probably due mostly to City Room training, I find it natural to write amid considerable activity. In contrast, I have difficulty working in the isolation required by, let's say, a novelist.[93]

A significant aspect of Morrison's work as a reviewer is his refusal to read a playscript prior to an opening. Periodically, theatre artists, especially playwrights, urge the critics to read the script before the opening. Morrison realizes that there are "several critics who have endorsed the idea,"[94] but he rejects it. First, new plays are usually in the process of revision until virtually the opening night. Secondly, many managements and a number of authors agree with him. Morrison is concerned that, "there may also be the possibility of a critic getting a preconception of a play, and then reacting unfavorably if his ideas are not realized. Not all viewers," according to Morrison, "and certainly not all critics--possess the talent for visualizing the printed word in terms of stage action, and even for those who do, no two visualizations might be the same."[95] He adds, "Some plays do not read

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[93]Herald News, August 24, 1969, p. 38.

[94]Bergen Record, July 17, 1966, p. 19.

[95]Ibid.

well but play great and, of course, the opposite is also true, but I am not interested in the play as literature."[96]

It is Morrison's opinion that, "It is the living performance, not the written script, to which an audience responds. If it were possible," he concludes, "to appreciate a play by reading the script there would be little function for the direction of a Peter Brook or the personal magic of an Alfred Lunt and a Lynn Fontanne."[97]

Not only does Morrison not approve of reading a script in advance, but he also "finds it risky to review a Broadway hit."[98] He believes that, unlike the movies, where the performance is recorded permanently on film, a stage play is apt to deteriorate during a run, in some cases, disastrously.

He considers musicals less vulnerable to such erosion of quality; they give the impression of being less formal and more dependent upon enthusiastic audience response than straight plays. Comedies, he thinks, are more a matter of technical precision and seem to lose their edge more quickly and to a greater degree than serious plays. "Returning to see 'Arsenic and Old Lace' some years ago, after the Joseph Kesselring farce had been running for many months, a first-nighter was appalled to note that the performance ran about 20 minutes shorter than it had at the opening. The difference

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[96]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, December 21, 1974.

[97]Bergen Record, July 16, 1966, p. 19.

[98]Bergen Record, July 25, 1964, p. 19.

was," according to Morrison, "simply a matter of lost laughs. The playing had become so slipshod that the show wasn't nearly as funny as it had been in its slick, original state."[99]

Morrison believes that some slipping is inevitable with every show, though not so much or so obviously with a serious play as with a comedy. "Actors are human," says Morrison, "and the very spontaneity and immediacy that makes a highly tuned stage performance an exciting element that's missing from any film or television show is bound to lose its edge more and more as it is repeated."[100]

While attending an opening night performance Morrison takes very few notes. He writes an occasional word, usually an adjective that seems particularly applicable to a scene, a passage of dialogue, or a performance. "It doesn't matter whether the writing is legible or not," Morrison believes, "the mere act of writing it down impresses it on the memory."[101] In fact, such notes are "generally ignored or forgotten as the deadline approaches."[102]

Another habit of Morrison's, as with other reviewers, is to studiously avoid discussions about the play.

> As a rule, critics prefer not to talk about the play at all with anyone, even their wives or whomever may be their companions

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[99]Ibid.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Herald News, October 30, 1975, p. 41.

[102]Herald News, June 2, 1975, p. 19.

> for the evening. For one thing, a reviewer shouldn't make up his mind about a show until the performance is over. Even then, it's easier to write a review if the critic's reaction is entirely his own, without the complications of other opinions.
>
> That's proper in any case, since a review is supposed to be the expression of individual emotion and mental response rather than a synthesis of various opinions. Right or wrong, a critic's function is to represent himself. In his case, the views of others are irrelevant.
>
> If the critic is reasonably balanced and isn't an intellectual or emotional eccentric or someone with a special cause or attitude, and if he expresses himself clearly, it is a 'good' review whether or not it is favorable. Since critics are, or should be, individualists, reviews should express a range of opinion. It's proper, therefore, that critics don't discuss a show during intermission.[103]

Morrison likes to take his wife, Toni, to the theatre, but readily acknowledges that:

> Going to the theatre with a critic, in short, may be anything but a blissful experience. Most critics are self-oriented, crotchety, opinionated, preoccupied and taciturn. Why any attractive charming lady should be willing to spoil a good show by sitting next to a critic is mystifying. Fortunately, in at least one instance, a lady did and apparently still does.[104]

What effect does reviewing plays for over forty years have on a man? Jack Richardson, the theatre critic for Commentary, writes "there was something stultifyingly insular about a reviewer's life, something that, if unchecked,

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[103]Herald News, October 24, 1974, p. 56.

[104]Herald News, August 24, 1972, p. 42.

could constrain the mind's faculties and make the soul bitter . . . Play reviewing is an occupation that demands a serene indifference to the way in which one spends a good deal of time."[105] In contrast, Morrison finds that "covering the Broadway stage is an ideal assignment."[106] He writes: "In all honesty this job is a cinch. Imagine, if you enjoy the theatre, being paid to attend, always having desirable seats on opening nights, and any time you want to see the show again, always free."[107] Reviewing, rather than "make the soul bitter," is for him, "the world's easiest and pleasantest job. The hours are short, theatre-going generally enjoyable, and practically never unpleasant--and you meet and even associate with the most interesting people. Don't ever let anyone tell you this is work," he cautions, "--the wonder is they pay you for it."[108]

After several decades of reviewing, Morrison is still excited by a Broadway opening. Unlike Richardson's belief that, "there might be something deadening in so much exposure to the theatre,"[109] Morrison writes:

> We can't speak for any other habitual first-nighters, of course. But for us, it's never a bore to go to an opening, and we enjoy seeing some shows several

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[105]Jack Richardson, "Reviewing Plays," Commentary 57 (April, 1974): 12.

[106]Herald News, February 18, 1969, p. 20.

[107]Herald News, August 25, 1970, p. 16.

[108]Ibid.

[109]Jack Richardson, "Reviewing Plays," Commentary, p. 12.

> times . . . An opening night on Broadway has never ceased to represent excitement, at least for us. A new play may always be an adventure--a stimulating and unforgettable emotional and intellectual experience. There's at least a slight possibility of it at even the least promising production.[110]

For Morrison, a new opening has a "magical quality." He finds that "There's a strange and infectious tingle in the air as you approach the theatre on an opening night on Broadway. The hurrying crowds have a look of eager expectancy, and even the idle gawkers who block the theatre entrance are evidence that it's an occasion."[111]

Although Morrison is not bored by theatre-going, he makes clear that his statements apply to his attitude in advance of the actual performance--not the performance itself.[112] Many plays are an ordeal to sit through. Only a few nights after his earlier column about not being bored appeared, Morrison attended the premiere of Mourning Pictures. He approached that evening, "as usual, with a feeling of anticipation, even though it was known that the drama dealt with the case of a woman hopelessly afflicted with cancer." Nevertheless, Morrison feels that "the most unlikely subjects can occasionally be treated with artistic effectiveness by a gifted playwright. You can never be

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[110] Bergen Record, June 17, 1967, p. 18.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Herald News, November 16, 1974, p. 22.

sure that tonight's show won't offer a memorable experience."[113]

Morrison recalled Mourning Pictures "Only partly because of the depressing subject matter, it was a theatrical ordeal I'd like to forget." Nevertheless, he concludes, "Years of reviewing have demonstrated that no matter how dreary a show may be, the next night may bring enjoyment. At least in anticipation, therefore, theatrical reviewing never becomes a bore."[114]

It is clear that Morrison treats reviewing as a very pleasant way to earn a living. He is not concerned with any "metaphysical agony" that may be a result of Broadway reviewing. He does admit, however, that he would not go to the theatre very frequently were it not for the fact that he does not have to pay for his seats.[115] Presumably there would be plays that he would avoid seeing if he had to pay. But how would Morrison know that a play was a waste of time and money in advance of its opening? By his own admission he could not, because, "As shows like 'Oklahoma,' 'Our Town,' 'Visit to a Small Planet' and '1776' have illustrated, advance reports may be spectacularly wrong."[116]

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[113]Ibid.

[114]Ibid.

[115]Herald News, August 25, 1970, p. 16.

[116]Herald News, November 16, 1974, p. 24.

CHAPTER IV:

HIS VIEWS ON OTHER CRITICS

In the previous chapter, Morrison's perception of his role as a reviewer was examined. Morrison believes that the level of reviewing should be raised, and he is fearless in his criticism of the "critics."

Morrison holds that most critics are "self-centered, crotchety, and opinionated,"[1] and notes that "most drama criticism is of a lower standard than the worst plays it deals with."[2] Criticism is dull, uninformative and pompous. In fact, "much of the time the writing itself is clumsy."[3] Furthermore, "critics and columnists give the impression of taking themselves too seriously. Critical evaluations and judgments," he writes, "should not be mistaken for wisdom inspired from on high, but are merely expressions of personal opinion, necessarily prejudiced."[4] Although he believes that the critic "may come to regard himself as the center of the universe, very little of the critic's material rates as immortal prose and few columnists can aspire to inclusion in any dictionary of famous quotations."[5]

For such reasons, Morrison finds the unabashed egotism of many critics difficult to ignore. When Morrison read an

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[1]Herald News, August 24, 1972, p. 42.

[2]Bergen Record, September 9, 1967, p. 14.

[3]Herald News, April 17, 1974, p. 24.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

article on film criticism by James Monaco in More magazine, in which he stated that John Simon, the newly appointed critic for New York magazine was "a star with the obligation to create an image as a critic," because "John Simon's career has always seemed to me to be one of the few authentic works of art of the 60's and 70's," and "in our age of celebrity, public lives have a validity that private lives don't,"[6] Morrison replied, "The obligation of the critic--indeed any writer--is to his subject, not himself. It is to inform the reader, not to conform or perform. One can only feel sorry for an observer who subscribes to the belief that 'public lives have a validity that private lives don't.'"[7] In another column entitled, "All about Ego . . . or, a critique of critics,"[8] Morrison sums up his belief:

> Ego is not a dire deficiency with most journalistic moilers, particularly critics and columnists. Reviewers sometimes give the impression of thinking they're more important than the show they cover.[9]

Unbridled egocentricity, according to Morrison, is a characteristic of critics who also double as columnists and "who occasionally assume that the readers are panting with impatience to read them."[10] He created a stereotype,

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[6]James Monaco, as quoted by Hobe Morrison, from September, 1975 issue of More in the Herald News, September 11, 1975, p. 26.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Herald News, August 17, 1974, p. 24.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

Felicity Featherbrain, to personify this kind of columnist-critic.

> I have no idea whatever about her, except from breathlessly pursuing her enthusiastic outpourings. Based on those, however, I would judge her to be about 16 years old and convinced that she's the most alert, best informed, wisest and most sought-after scribe in journalistic history.
>
> Felicity went on vacation recently, as she graciously informed her following, and I was practically prostrated for reading matter in her absence. But she finally returned after an agonizing two-week absence, and began her column with the reassuring announcement, "Well, I'm back." Gosh! What a break for us all![11]

His caricature of the ego-driven, adolescent-like columnist stems from his own past. A younger brother of his had, according to Morrison:

> been upstairs taking his nap one afternoon, while his mother served tea for two visiting neighbor ladies. When the tot woke up, his nurse got him dressed and was bringing him downstairs to meet the guests.
>
> From infancy, he was an outgoing individual with no dearth of confidence. As he descended the stairs, holding his nurse's hand, he looked through the rungs in the balustrade, saw the visitors and called out exhuberantly, "Here I come." It was a spontaneous expression of character only slightly restrained all his life.[12]

Morrison often uses this same example to illustrate "the

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[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

conceit of many--if not most reviewers. The tendency is for the critic to consider himself more important than the show he's covering." He acknowledges "in case of finger pointing, I claim no exception to the norm. It's an occupational hazard and vice."[13]

Although Morrison pleads guilty, he is generally careful to avoid the more overt qualities of "the Felicity Feather-brain class."[14] In fact, he is able to handle the problems of "ego" quite well. He usually avoids pompous or self-serving pronouncements, and refers to himself as having the intellect of a "common citizen" or "average theatregoer," without illusions regarding the significance of his reviews. He wants his comments accepted as the opinions of an experienced theatregoer who "gets paid to write reviews for a newspaper."[15]

An unpleasant manifestation of the critic's ego is malicious style cultivated in order to become notorious and, consequently, better known. Such a critic treats a poor performance in his review as a personal affront and strikes back with sharp, gratuitous, personal attacks.

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974. When Morrison first started to write for the Herald News, the newspaper encouraged this view of Morrison as a member of the audience, when it advertised that Morrison "doesn't make pronouncements. He just tells you what he, as a spectator of taste and discrimination, thinks." Herald News, October 8, 1969, p. 1.

Oddly enough, Morrison states, "Those who are the most caustic in their criticism of others are likely to be the most sensitive to criticism of themselves."[16]

Morrison dislikes such critics. He himself rarely engages in such tactics because he finds them personally distasteful and he has described such attacks as the acts of "psychopaths who get emotional satisfaction from inflicting pain."[17] For him, "The basic difference between a critic and a gangster is that one reviews the art and the other, the artist."[18] He still refers to a Goodman Ace piece on Barbara Striesand when Ace was a critic for radio station WPAT.

> The entire piece was based, although he didn't quite say so, on the size of Streisand's nose. It would begin, for example, "As everybody knows (nose) . . ." It was a horrible review, simply inexcusable. I'm sure it hurt her. Goodman Ace is a funny man, but that was not funny.[19]

Morrison believes that his multiple role as reporter, drama editor, and reviewer requires him to write "nicely" in his reviews, while he is being truthful. "My role is different from the John Simon's. Unlike those critics, I

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[16]Herald News, December 28, 1970, p. 18.

[17]Herald News, August 5, 1970, p. 30.

[18]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

[19]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

have to call the managements the next week and ask 'How was business?'"[20] He does not compromise his sense of integrity but he can ill afford to alienate his public. Perhaps this helps explain why Morrison, in a very negative review, rarely mentions the names of the actors, dancers, and other professionals associated with the production and does not engage in malicious witticisms. His criticism of such artists is specific with regard to their performance in the play but he does not, as a rule, attack them personally.

Morrison realizes that the artist who receives a negative review is at an unfair disadvantage. There is very little that the artist can do to retaliate short of physically assaulting his tormentor.

> It might be discreet for an impulsive artist to take pause, and consider that the adversary with the typewriter, the by-line and the reading public is apt to have not only the last word, but the lasting one. An unfavorable notice endures a lot longer than a bloody nose or the blackest black eyes. Beware the writer with a grievance and a gift for words.[21]

Moreover, Morrison really believes that personal attacks on performers, particularly actors, can damage their ability to perform effectively in future plays. The actor's ego is at the cornerstone of an actor's talent. If his ego

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[20]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

[21]Herald News, May 27, 1969, p. 25.

is damaged, his ability to successfully exercise his craft is diminished. Actors have "a lot of ego needs and neurotic things involved in their acting."[22] Discussing the ingredients that go into the making of a great actor, besides talent, Morrison singles out "robust health and vitality, imagination, self-discipline, tremendous incentive and persistence, and perhaps as a base for it all, ego."[23] The decent and fair treatment of performers by a critic is a hallmark of a critic "who respects not only his subject but his craft."[24] Morrison finds himself in agreement with John Lahr, former drama critic for the Village Voice, who observed, with regard to "savage critics":

> It is not enough to say that their anger is a marketable emotional event in bland magazines. There is something deeper. Simon Weil, in Gravity and Grace, makes a relevant observation. "To harm a person is to receive something from him. What? What have we gained when we have done harm? We have gained in importance. We have filled an emptiness in ourselves by creating one in somebody else."[25]

A critic should act with "grace" in the classic sense, i.e., "with fitness, propriety based on generosity, tact, courtesy, and compassion."[26]

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[22]Alan Arkin as quoted by Hobe Morrison from Reel: The Screen Actor's Guild Magazine, in the Herald News, October 6, 1975, p. 12.

[23]Herald News, November 20, 1969, p. 48.

[24]Herald News, June 5, 1970, p. 22.

[25]Ibid.

[26]The American Heritage Dictionary, William Morris, ed. (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), s.v.

Because Morrison believes that a critic has little or no right to take himself too seriously, he is particularly annoyed by those critics who behave as if they were more important to the theatre than the plays they review. An example of such unbridled egotism to Morrison is the tendency of "most reviewers to go running up the aisles as soon as a play is over,"[27] a "deadly sin"[28] that unduly focuses attention on the critic. Although many critics have replied that there is a very real need to beat the slow-moving after-theatre crowds in order to have more time in which to write, Morrison remains unconvinced. "A pox on eager-leavers, those impatient Humpty Dumpties who spring from their seats and stampede up the aisle at the first hint of an about-to-descend curtain. If nobody wants them, they can be thrown out with the trash."[29]

After seeing the play Home, Morrison wrote:

> A regrettable aspect of the impressive opening the other night of "Home," at the Morosco theatre, was the boorish behavior of the eager leavers, most particularly the critics and the usual coterie of other important herd instinct first-nighters. What made it notable was not that it was unusual--quite the contrary, it was habitual.
>
> The irritating and embarrassing thing about it was that this was a great occasion with John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson, two of the world's most distinguished actors, giving the performance of their respective

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[27]Jerry McNeely, "The Criticism and Reviewing of Brooks Atkinson," p. 45.

[28]Bergen Record, September 9, 1967, p. 14

[29]Bergen Record, December 23, 1967, p. 18.

> careers. What made the inconsiderate and mindless group exodus so inexcusable was that even for the critics with the earliest deadlines, it was transparently unnecessary.[30]

Morrison argues that "Broadway premieres are nowadays invariably early for the sole purpose of having the performance end in plenty of time for the critics with early deadlines to write their reviews," and adds that "under normal circumstances opening nights ring down at 10:00, which allows ample leeway for all but a very few critics--those on morning papers or covering for television or radio stations or representing news syndicates." He observes:

> In recent years, it has become general practice for virtually all the critics to jump up at the first sign of the descending curtain and to crowd up the aisles obscuring the stage and ruining the curtain calls--still one of the nice traditions of playgoing--for the remaining audience. Incidentally it is also unsettling and must be slightly disconcerting to the stars.[31]

Morrison believes that, "Almost all of these ill-mannered, inconsiderate eager leavers have no excuse of an early deadline. They work for afternoon newspapers and then have several hours in which to write their reviews, or are with weekly publications and have a day or more at their disposal. In many cases," he chides imitators of this practice, "they aren't even critics at all but are habitual first-nighters who want to be considered insiders. They

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

pattern their behavior after the cloddish critics." He concludes:

> In the case of the Home opening it rang up shortly after 7:30 and since the David Storey drama is relatively short, the final curtain rang down at exactly 9:27. In other words, even the critics with 11:00 deadlines had more than an hour and a half to write their reviews--more than sufficient for any competent journalist. Under the circumstances, the exit stampede was a disgrace.[32]

Similarly, Morrison took note of the hostility of New York critics to a suggestion by Broadway producers that the opening night curtain be changed to 8:30 p.m. from 7:30 p.m. Although he disliked the idea because he felt it would inconvenience Broadway audiences, he resented his fellow critics who argued against the proposed change--not because it would be bad for the theatre, but because it would give them less time to write their reviews. "Only a dozen critics at most, are directly involved--the others have no deadline problem. More to the point, drama reviewing is a job, and it's up to the reviewer to adjust to whatever conditions he faces, and to do his job."[33]

In Morrison's view, a critic who is overly concerned with his own needs is guilty of unprofessional conduct. That is why he finds critics who leave before a performance is over, or who complain about the bad shows that they have to endure not only rude, but unprofessional.

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[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid.

> Paul Benzaquin, the reviewer for radio station WEEI, Boston, who recently walked out of the theatre after only partly covering the opening of the pre-Broadway tryout, "The Penny Wars," reportedly told listeners, "I've had it with stage criticism. From now on I'm reviewing films. They just don't air condition theatres the way they used to."

Morrison's reply? "Maybe they should air condition critics."[34]

Morrison does not believe that critics are as powerful in the theatre as they are reputed to be. Clive Barnes, formerly of the New York Times, had often been credited by the general public as having ultimate life and death power over all new plays. "To be realistic," says Morrison, "Barnes may have more impact on attendance than most critics, but not even he has decisive power in the theatre. There have been numerous instances of hits that he has panned, and flops that he has praised. Such cases," grants Morrison, "aren't obvious or dramatic," however, "so that they're apt not to be noticed or remembered."[35] Nevertheless, Morrison does agree that a "pan" by Barnes and others would probably close a questionable show and that their praise would give it a boost. But he believes "it would only tend to prove that the show in question was about as bad or as good as they said, since audiences would probably agree with them."[36]

It is Morrison's contention that the type of show itself helps to determine the effect of the reviews.

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[34]Herald News, October 8, 1969, p. 30.

[35]Ibid.

[36]Ibid.

> Musicals and comedies are generally more popular than serious dramas, and good revivals generally have shorter runs than good new plays. Thus favorable notices are apt to help musicals and comedies more than they do serious plays. In contrast, pans may not hurt musicals and comedies much, but may be fatal to serious plays.[37]

Serious plays are particularly vulnerable and even mildly approving notices will affect the box office. "Under the present economic conditions on Broadway that is apt to mean the show will have to close, frequently at the end of the first week."[38]

Morrison points out that "the public frequently ignores the advice of the so-called experts."[39] The popular musical Can-Can was "A dodo to the critics but became a popular success and has been a consistent hit in musical stock."[40] The Impossible Years, which opened shortly after the newspaper strike of 1965 was covered by all the critics for the dailies and was almost unanimously dismissed. The broadcasting reviewers did not think much of it either. However, the Bob Fisher and Arthur Marks comedy did sell-out business, aided by the presence of its star, Alan King.

An even more outstanding example of critical disapproval and audience success is Saint Joan, which Morrison believes

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Bergen Record, October 6, 1967, p. B-11.

[39]Herald News, October 21, 1970, p. 26.

[40]Bergen Record, May 17, 1962, p. 57.

to be Shaw's best play. In a review of a revival of the play in 1962, he wrote:

> When it was first presented 38 years ago, however, "Saint Joan" had less than an ecstatic reception. As was and still is their wont, the critics compared it unfavorably with the author's previous works; those they hadn't approved too highly either. The late Burns Mantle, who then edited the "Best Plays" series of annual volumes about the New York stage did not even select the Shavian work among the 10 best for inclusion among the condensed texts for the 1923-1924 season.
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> This was one of those instances in which the public's taste was more discerning than the critics', however, for "Saint Joan" had a New York run of 214 performances, which was spectacular for that time and so was established in general esteem as a distinguished play.[41]

In addition to the public's ignoring the advice of critics in regard to specific plays, Morrison found that during the New York newspaper strike of 1965, the critics were actually expendable. "It's a horrible thing to contemplate," wrote Morrison:

> but drama critics may be expendable. They're not, it's beginning to appear, either the villainous idiots they're often called by outraged authors, actors and producers, or the heroic sages they invariably consider themselves. The truth may be that critics just don't matter much one way or the other.[42]

On the basis of a further study he made on the Broadway

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[41]Bergen Record, February 22, 1962, p. 17.

[42]Ibid.

theatre, Morrison found that during the strike there was the same ratio of successful plays to failures. He concluded that critics who always denied their part in the creation of hits just as vociferously as they denied they were responsible for quick flops "may have been right on both counts."[43]

Oddly enough, Broadway professionals who had denounced the destructive power of the critics in the past lamented the loss of the critics. Such professionals were apparently "wringing their hands in frustration because the supposedly deadly seven aisle seat occupants were unable to publish their columns."[44] Morrison noted, "Much of the chagrin was over the lack of published theatre news and the inability to run ads--particularly ads quoting the favorable statements of the formerly excoriated critics."[45] As soon as the strike ended the running battle between critic and artist was quickly resumed.

It is clear that Morrison does not consider critics to be "destroyers of the theatre, at least not by savagely panning worthwhile shows. If anything," he believes, "most critics are too kind, or perhaps just discriminating enough."[46] Morrison's opinion is supported by Variety's

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Herald News, December 28, 1962, p. 30.

[45]Ibid.

[46]Herald News, August 5, 1970, p. 13.

yearly surveys. Headlines such as "N.Y. Drama Crix Prove Softies Again, Like More Shows Than Do Audiences,"[47] or "Crix Still Deal Gently With Bad Ones"[48] proclaim that "the reviews have favored more shows than have found audience support."[49]

Emory Lewis, Morrison's successor at The Record, sums up "the power and the glory" of the New York critics:

> The critics are, after all, average citizens whose special claim to fame is that they have endured a lot of plays for a number of years; they are, by and large, honorable men simply doing their job the best they can. Some are quite good, some are deplorable. Most of them are grossly underpaid for their grisly assignments. To elevate them to some exalted Parnassus is nonsense. Americans do nothing by halves. Actually upon close scrutiny of the reviews, most critics are not very critical. They are a kind crew, much too tolerant of Broadway's debris, and they seldom desire the destructive power thrust upon them.[50]

Morrison would add "if the critics as a group are destroying the theatre, it's by being platitudinous and dull."[51]

Morrison's feelings about his peers were confirmed when, in 1966, he became the first Variety staffer to be accepted

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[47]Variety, December 6, 1950, p. 56.

[48]Variety, May 24, 1950, p. 68.

[49]Variety, December 6, 1950, p. 56.

[50]Emory Lewis, Stages: The Fifty Year Childhood of the American Theatre, p. 219-220.

[51]Herald News, August 5, 1970, p. 13.

into the thirty year old Critics' Circle. Morrison's reactions to the Critics' Circle provide more interesting insights.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of a Variety reviewer being asked to join the Critics' Circle, it is important to examine the relationship that existed between the critics' organization and the trade journal. Prior to this time, Variety and the Critics' Circle had enjoyed a healthy dislike for one another. Variety considered the Critics' Circle as the critical establishment and itself as the Circle's persistent gadfly. Variety tried to expose critical indecisiveness, egocentricity and pompousness. Critics were not sacred cows, but only a legitimate source of news. Under the heading, "How Variety Shamed the Critics,"[52] Variety declared "The nation's press . . . looks to Variety as a dispassionate observer of the show biz scene. So these columns have included throughout the years news stories about the antics and impact of that special breed--the New York drama critic."[53]

The article further reveals Variety's muckraking attitude:

> Some of the boys have been a show in themselves, hopping down the aisle with snowshoe 'gators (Alec Woolcott); indulging in eccentric journalistic deportment like Burton Rascoe; holding court on the sidewalks between the first night intermissions, not to mention the sleeping male beauties sleeping off a bute of a hangover from a

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[52]Variety, November 30, 1955, p. 2.

[53]Ibid.

too-many-splendored martini binge.[54]

The Critics' Circle was equally unhappy with Variety's "New York Drama Critics' Box Score" which spotlighted the critics' "own tendency to straddle, duck, evade clear opinions on borderline shows."[55] Although the announced purpose of the box score was to encourage the reviewers to take definite stands on productions, rather than to write inconclusive notices, the data revealed which of the men had the best average for predicting hits and failures. It was such information which attracted the most attention. Critics generally condemned the box score on the grounds that it "tempts reviewers to think of a play in terms of its possible popularity, rather than its worth as a drama."[56] Variety maintained that it did not "dispute the intellectual concept of quality criticism as a comment on content, form and significance separate from commercial prognostication,"[57] but that the "exposing of weaslers cloaked in scholarship"[58] was the central issue.

In the fall of 1946 the Circle formally asked Variety to discontinue the annual feature on the grounds that it was:

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[54]Ibid.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Richard Watts, quoted in Schoenberg, "The Dramatic Criticism of Richard Watts," p. 26.

[57]Variety, November 30, 1955, p. 2.

[58]Ibid.

> not only detrimental to the theatre's best interest but utterly alien to the purpose and intention of criticism. Feeling that criticism and the box office are completely unrelated, and being convinced that the critic's function is to appraise the merits of productions rather than to prophesy the length of runs, we would, as a body, be grateful for the discontinuance of such irrelevant and harmful scores.[59]

Variety ignored the 1946 request, replying that the Circle request, "smacked of reformed sinners reading Variety a lecture on sin."[60] Four years later, however, Variety did drop the box score.

In 1966, Morrison became a member of the Critics' Circle. From his first meeting, Morrison began to write articles for Variety about the Circle's activities as viewed by an insider. He described his impressions of the meeting very matter-of-factly:

> it wasn't as boring as several members had predicted. Nor was it what the late Percy Hammond once called a nest of discontented rattle snakes. On the other hand, it was hardly a thrilling experience.[61]

Shortly, however, Morrison began to anger a number of members by his reporting of their disagreements with each other. He noted "Critics are apt to be most amusing when they get to quarreling among themselves,"[62] adding:

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[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Bergen Record, November 28, 1967, pp. 13, 21.

[62]Herald News, December 28, 1970, p. 38.

> As Brooks Atkinson once remarked, "There's nothing of less interest to a critic than what another critic thinks." When they deign to take notice of one another's opinions, however, their scorn is likely to be monumental. It's apt to be when they disagree publicly that their mutual esteem may turn to mere venom.[63]

Morrison believes in publicly airing disputes among critics, and he is convinced that such disagreements among critics are healthy for the theatre.

> Heaven help us when we all agree. I think that critics should bring all kinds of violent opinions to the theatre and get angry over them. It would be a terrible thing for the theatre if nobody got angry over it any more, if a play didn't make people mad, if critics no longer disagreed.[64]

It is Morrison's opinion that "One of the unfortunate aspects of today's theatre is the lack of public controversy."[65]

In addition to Morrison's belief that controversy among critics is news and that the public has a right to know the details, the crusader in Morrison drives him to keep the critics in the spotlight.

> Critics generally keep their intra-mural bickering out of print, preferring to express themselves privately to associates and friends. When they become incensed enough to belabor each other publicly, it's

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[63]Herald News, January 19, 1971, p. 14.

[64]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[65]Bergen Record, January 23, 1965, p. 19.

> a treat for the readers and is particularly entertaining and satisfying to the actors, authors and others who have been their victims and hate them both.[66]

It is the "victim" of the critics that Morrison has in mind when he observes "Everybody likes to read about critics getting into fights with the theatre pro, particularly if the critic loses."[67] He readily acknowledges that "such stories make for good provocative copy."[68] Some of Variety's most popular news stories include actress Kim Stanley's pronouncement describing the critics as "fat-heads," and playwright Elmer Rice's observations indicating that the Broadway critics were "for the most part, men without intellect, perception, sensitivity or background."[69] A storm of controversy was initiated by Maxwell Anderson's charge that the critics were "the Jukes family of journalism" and Edward Albee's assertion that "if the critics could be bought off, there would be decent theatre in this country for five years."[70] Indeed, "Most people," Morrison notes, "resent the critics and think that they're a bunch of 'wise guys'" and "in many cases, they're right. Critics take themselves too seriously for their own good."[71]

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[66]Herald News, February 28, 1970, p. 38.

[67]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, January 28, 1974.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Emory Lewis, Stages, p. 218.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

In an interview in 1974, Morrison conceded that many members of the Critics' Circle probably regretted the decision to accept the Variety reviewer. "Variety had always given the critics needles. Now when Variety gives needles," said Morrison, "I'm held responsible."[72] In fact he was held responsible by some critics for reporting disputes of which he had no knowledge. At one meeting "John Simon and Brendan Gill got into an argument and Simon threatened to kick Gill's head in. This was reported to the press."[73] Morrison was accused of having publicized the exchange even though he was not present at the time. Later, when it was learned that another member had leaked the information, George Oppenheimer called him on behalf of the Circle to request that he report particular facts in Variety. Morrison was outraged; he told Oppenheimer that his obligation was to Variety and not to the Circle. Although he was a member of the Circle, that did not mean that Variety's freedom of action could be compromised.

Morrison remains a very vocal critic of the Critics' Circle. He believes that the real purpose of the organization is to gain attention for the members. "What other real object is there to critical awards for the 'best' this or that work than to publicize the selecting group?"[74]

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[72]Ibid.

[73]Ibid.

[74]Herald News, January 14, 1976, p. 20.

"Best" awards do not raise artistic standards. "Is it a proper critical function to try to increase business for a particular play, movie, television show or what-have-you? Isn't a critic's proper obligation to subordinate himself in favor of attention to the art he is covering?"[75]

Finally, he declares:

> The embarrassing fact is that most critics are unqualified for the job . . . the N. Y. Circle of which I'm one of the less esteemed members, admits anyone who is hired as the reviewer for one of the local publications.
>
> That means, in short, that the membership of the Circle is decided by publishers, not by professional critical peers. There are no standards of excellence or responsibility.[76]

Why then does he remain a member? Aware of the inconsistency, he acknowledges that being a member of "that group of self-conscious authorities"[77] has made him more aware of the problems of a critics' organization. About his relationship to the Circle, Morrison concludes, "I'm inclined to think that my only useful function in the Circle is voting against some of the more far out shows that otherwise might squeak through as winners."[78]

Morrison believes that many critics are unqualified.

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[75]Ibid.

[76]Herald News, August 3, 1974, p. 22.

[77]Herald News, January 14, 1976, p. 20.

[78]Ibid.

Backgrounds of working reviewers offer no clue to qualifications. Most reviewers come to their positions through careers in other branches of journalism. Walter Kerr, an exception, had been a professor of drama before becoming a critic for the Times. There is no regularized procedure for becoming a drama critic, and Morrison admits to knowing of some unusual paths to the profession. One critic got his appointment because he was the publisher's son.[79] Morrison joked, this method "is effective but not easy to imitate."[80] Morrison "quoted" George Bernard Gouge, "the ubiquitous talent agent" and fictionalized archetype:

> The best way to become a critic is to be standing in the managing editor's line of vision when he happens to remember that there's a show to be covered. If the regular critic has been taken suddenly drunk, the second-stringer is covering a flower show and the sports staff is involved in a poker game, you're a cinch to get the assignment . . .[81]

He concludes "One thing seems clear--drama critics are made, not born."[82] Morrison is convinced that no formal training can make someone into a drama critic and that an exceptional education is not a prerequisite for the work. He believes, along with James Huneker, that for reviewing, "A man's

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[79]David Stern III, Morrison's drama editor at the Philadelphia Record, was the son of the paper's owner.

[80]Herald News, December 5, 1974, p. 54.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

ponderous learning is of no more value than the superficial skating of some merry emotional blade over thin ice."[83] Neither must one have been a creative artist before he can become a good critic. Morrison recalls from his early years as a critic that he was reproached by an actor because he had "panned" a play in which the actor had appeared. The actor (John Halliday) asked Morrison if he had ever written a play. Morrison replied "no." He asked Morrison, "Have you ever been an actor?" Morrison said, "Never." At that point, according to Morrison, "You could see where he was going. So he went through the various categories and finally asked, "What qualifies you to review this play? It was written by S. N. Behrman. It was produced by the Theatre Guild. It had Jane Carrol, a fine star and one of the great actresses of the American theatre. It was directed by Phillip Moeller, a distinguished director. What qualified you to say that it was no good?"[84] Morrison replied:

> There's no great problem there. My editor sent me. Do you have to be particularly qualified to appreciate this play? Weren't you trying to sell it to the public at three dollars a person? Who do you have to be to appreciate it? I think it's a very civilized play; I just don't think it's theatrical.

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[83]James Hunneker, in an Introduction to the published reviews of Bernard Shaw, critic for the London Saturday Review in 1907, as quoted by Hobe Morrison, Herald News, March 4, 1976, p. 32.

[84]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

> That's why I was sent--to express what I think, not what somebody else thinks. That's all I was sent for and that's what I did.[85]

Morrison's opinion about a critic's qualifications is similar to the anecdote that he tells about George Bernard Shaw. Someone took Shaw to task for criticizing acting. Since Shaw hadn't been an actor, how could he know anything about the art of acting? Shaw reacted quickly: "I can't lay an egg either, but I know more about an omelet than does the wisest hen in all England. I know more about what goes into an omelet than does any chicken."[86]

Morrison believes that a reviewer must be able to write succinct, readable reviews, be well informed, have interesting ideas and be able to communicate his enthusiasms. For Morrison, the most important criteria is readability. As James Huneker said, at the turn of the century:

> The main point is--particularly in dramatic criticism--whether the writer holds our attention. Otherwise his work has no excuse for existence. Be as profound as you please--but be pleasing. Nature abhors an absolute in dramatic criticism.[87]

The critic who conforms to these precepts, according to Morrison, may be considered a fine critic. Unfortunately,

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[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

[87]James Hunneker, Introduction to the published reviews of Bernard Shaw, quoted by Hobe Morrison, Herald News, March 4, 1976, p. 32.

he believes very few who are called critics or reviewers measure up to these standards.

CHAPTER V:

HIS CRITERIA FOR COMMERCIAL SUCCESS

PLAYWRITING FOR THE "THEATRE OF PLEASURE"

In the years Morrison has been reviewing plays on Broadway he has advanced criteria for possible commercial success. Foremost is his belief that a play can succeed on Broadway only if it offers pleasure to an audience. It must entertain, i.e., "hold the attention of an audience,"[1] and to do this it must be "pleasant" as opposed to "unpleasant."

What then are the specific characteristics of a "pleasant" or successful play as Morrison perceives them? He does not consider these criteria as inflexible or infallible, but nevertheless they represent his critical approach to the problem of trying to ascertain, with some degree of accuracy, the future popularity of a play on Broadway.

The key question for Morrison is, "What are the elements that make a good show?" Credibility, believable characters and situations, audience identification and caring about the people in the show are basic for success.

> To be successful as art, a play or movie, painting, dance or novel should be a mirror for the audience. If we don't see ourselves in it--identify with it--it fails. In great art, the recognition

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[1]The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, s.v. "entertain."

> of self should be general, and in both directions. That is, everyone should identify with it.[2]
>
> In regard to the theatre, it's essential to remember that audiences are human, and similarly have changed very little, if at all. They still want to see shows about projections of themselves--that is, with believable characters and identifiable situations.[3]

Criticism of "character" is one of the major concerns of Morrison's reviews. He praises Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman, as "an acutely affecting drama because its characters are inescapably recognizable and self-identifiable. It is unusual because there is an element of Willy in everyone and his concentration on worldly success applies to society in general."[4]

On the other hand, he "pans" Tennessee Williams' Vieux Carre. "There's no central character for an audience to identify with or care about, and it all seems talky, pointless, dull and interminable."[5]

Morrison points out that if a work is to succeed, "there is generally just one character we identify with and feel strongly about."[6] In discussing plans for a movie version of Arthur Kopit's play, Indians, Morrison advises

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[2]Herald News, December 15, 1975, p. 22.

[3]Bergen Record, August 29, 1964, p. 19.

[4]Herald News, February 28, 1977, p. B-4.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Herald News, February 28, 1977, p. B-4.

that, if the movie is to succeed where the play had failed, the story and audience reaction should be focused on a single character, rather than on several.[7]

Character, too, must be clearly defined:

> "Charlie" . . . is supposed to be about the difficult life of the children of geniuses, but an audience may still be puzzled to know exactly what the playwright is getting at. It isn't even too clear who the central character is intended to be or what he's meant to represent.[8]

Because Morrison insists the protagonist be a clearly defined, fully dimensional character, he dislikes "plays in which the characters are identified as The Man, The Woman, The Boy, The Girl, etc. instead of by names."[9] Andorra, by Max Frisch is such a play:

> "Andorra" is one of those terribly symbolic plays in which the characters don't have names, but only designations. Except for the boy and girl, they merely represent ideas or attitudes. They're not people, but only the author's pawns. They have no individuality, no minds or feelings or will of their own, so they have no reality or life. "Andorra" may be fascinating for earnest students of the drama, but it's hardly for entertainment seekers or even those who relish recognizable individuality in the theatre.[10]

Morrison believes that the main character in a work should be likable as well.

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[7]Herald News, August 14, 1975, p. 35.

[8]Bergen Record, May 15, 1964, p. 77.

[9]Bergen Record, December 23, 1967, p. 18.

[10]Bergen Record, November 11, 1963, p. 80.

> I resent having to spend an evening with unpleasant or boring stage characters --the sort I wouldn't have in my home or whose homes I wouldn't visit. I like intelligent, articulate, witty people, both onstage and in life.[11]

Although Morrison believes that audiences usually will identify and "root for" the personable character, at times they will support an unattractive protagonist.

> Sheridan Whiteside, the hero of "The Man Who Came to Dinner," was something of a self-centered monster, of course, but there was something redeemable about him, just as there was about the heel played by Gene Kelly in "Pal Joey" and the back-knifing young climber played by Robert Morse in "How to Succeed." Even though you disapproved of those two ruthless rats, you were apt to find yourself rooting for them.[12]

Likewise Morrison is fascinated by Shakespeare's Macbeth "about whom the audience cares but roots against."[13] He recognizes the flaw in his theory.

> The audience disapproves of the title character, and wants him to fail--but at the same time is concerned about him and has a strange sort of sympathy for him as a victim of circumstances he cannot control. But then Shakespeare was an unparalleled genius and could break any rule.[14]

In addition to the importance of character to success on Broadway, Morrison believes that the situations characters

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[11]Herald News, March 6, 1976, p. M-4.

[12]Bergen Record, March 29, 1967, p. C-19.

[13]Herald News, March 5, 1976, p. 20.

[14]Herald News, February 28, 1977, p. B-4. Morrison does not extend this sympathy to other Shakespearean villains. For example, he detests the evil protagonist in Richard III, and dislikes the play.

find themselves in must be believable, "palatable," and original. He criticizes the 1951 production of Faithfully Yours, starring Ann Southern:

> Apparently in an attempt at atmosphere, the peice is presented as a first-person narrative, with Miss Sothern introducing the multiple scenes from in front of a scrim, then stepping back to play the dizzy wife who calls in a psychiatric charlatan to analyze her husband by proxy. Having become infected with the Freudian bug, she's convinced that his faithfulness isn't normal. This slightly improbable situation is presently stretched beyond credibility to the point of silliness.[15]

On occasion, the basic situation in a play raises too many questions and provides too few answers. The net result is audience confusion. He writes about Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright:

> What is the corrosive secret of this tormented family, living in a web of pretenses and lies? What is the significance of the relentless mother's obviously symbolic obsession about having defied and deserted her people in Atlanta to wed a ne-er do well and follow him to New Orleans, which she scorns and seemingly fears as a place without twilight? The author doesn't reveal . . .
>
> How could the departed eldest son, whom the mother fondly believes was killed in Korea, have really been imprisoned for murder without the truth becoming known before it does? Why does this fiercely maternal woman dote on her second son, virtually ignore her sensitive daughter and baby her moronic youngest son as she does?
>
> What is the explanation for the elaborate texture of deceptions and falsehoods every-

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[15]Variety, October 24, 1951, p. 68.

> one talks about so repetitiously?
>
> Why, at the end, after trying so hard to arrange for the younger son's marriage to the neighborhood strumpet and driving him away from home when that scheme fails, does she surrender so utterly to the conclusion that there's nothing to do now when her adored second son responds to his draft summons several days early with the intention of being killed? It's a puzzle and a letdown.[16]

Some situations lack originality and are too hackneyed, and thus the play will not succeed.

> The performances are good, but everything else is ordinary in "Don't Call Back" . . . The Russell O'Neil play seems contrived and not only inconsequential but transparently spurious. It's a so-what show.
>
> Arlene Francis is the star of the synthetic yarn about a famous stage and television actress held captive in her Park Avenue duplex by four murderers, one of whom is her violently disturbed son. Despite the skillful playing, the show suggests a fugitive from the boob tube.
>
> There have been a number of plays on the general situation of an individual or family held captive in their own homes--"Blind Alley," "Kind Lady" and "The Desperate Hours" come immediately to mind. The renegade child idea was more chillingly presented in "The Bad Seed."
>
> In short, "Don't Call Back" is a very old hat of the sort that motion pictures made anachronistic decades ago and television subsequently buried.[17]

Some plays contain situations that are simply too unpalatable to attract the general public. The Watering

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[16]Bergen Record, December 24, 1962, p. 27.

[17]Bergen Record, March 19, 1975, p. 15.

Place is one such play to Morrison:

> There's no explaining plays like "The Watering Place." The one redeeming thing about it, however, is that everyone involved is bound to do better next time. . . . It involves a mysterious young ex-soldier who visits a family of extreme neurotics and, after seducing and impregnating the daughter-in-law and breaking the old man's arm, leaves them in a state of abject misery.
>
> It might be interesting to know what the author may have had in mind, although it would be a rash thing to invite him to explain. The 67-year-old father is a health nut and a martinet who evidently scorned and was jealous of his pampered, weakling son; the mother has lived in a state of fantasy since the son's death in a North Vietnamese prison camp, and she comforts herself with the idea that the daughter-in-law is about to have a baby the image of his late father.
>
> The daughter-in-law is a nymphomaniac who hated her husband, but to please the mother she has worn a pillow under her dress for 15 months in pretended pregnancy. It's not easy to see exactly what the visitor is after, except to test the dead man's prison descriptions of married life with the girl, and perhaps to break the old man's arm and appropriate a few drinks of his bourbon.
>
> Well, some nights a theatre-goer can't get a break no matter what happens, and the only way out is to feel sorry for the victims involved in the project.[18]

Another category of "unpalatable situations" are the ones that Morrison considers tasteless.

> . . . What kind of a world is this? Or rather, what kind of people have we become? The questions arose the other night during the official opening of "MacBird," the off-Broadway play that parodies "Macbeth."
>
> The show is evidently supposed to be funny. Yet two of its scenes depict the assassination

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[18]Ibid.

> and funeral procession of a character called John O'Dune, an unidentified representation of the late John F. Kennedy. Even the moronic spectators who guffawed at some of the other tasteless episodes were silent, presumably in embarrassment at these acutely painful passages.
>
> "Macbird" is a tasteless show . . . inept, dull and adds up to a depressing night. It will be interesting to see how long a sensation-craving public will support it at the box office.[19]

Many of Morrison's admonitions regarding situation also pertain to subject matter. If, in Morrison's opinion, a playwright chooses morbid, trite, sordid, or parochial subjects, a play will not have popular and commerical appeal.

The subject of the 1954 production of The Living Room, is the love affair between a young Catholic girl and an older, married Protestant that is resolved by the girl's suicide in the face of societal pressure. "Audiences are unlikely to be attracted to such a parochial and depressing discourse as 'Room.'"[20]

The problem with Bravo, by Edna Ferber and George S. Kaufman was in its "transparently manufactured treatment of a hackneyed subject. . . ." Morrison believes that this play, about the efforts of a group of refugees from central Europe to adjust themselves to the strange and difficult conditions of New York might have been saved "with some

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[19]Bergen Record, February 27, 1967, p. B-23.

[20]Variety, November 24, 1954, p. 74.

original handling . . . from falling into the category of the trite cliche."[21]

Morrison is convinced that some subject matter may be repugnant to general audiences. The subject of The Hashish Club is the effect of getting stoned or high on a hallucinary drug.

> According to the folklore of marijuana, LSD and such mind-benders, so-called trips can be fascinating experiences for the participants; however it's never been claimed that they are anything but an unmitigating bore for onlookers . . . and so it is with "The Hashish Club."
>
> The members of the club are supposed to take a triple dose of the stuff for this occasion and they then play word games, conduct mock trials, pantomime football scrimmages, perform a song and dance, act and strive for a "breakthrough" with a brilliant inspiration worthy of being chalked up on a blackboard.
>
> At the end of the first act, they all don assorted weirdities of outer garments and venture hesitantly outside, one pausing to take along a pistol. Perhaps the second act is better--it could hardly be worse. That will not be resolved in this respect, however, for the escape opportunity was too inviting to resist.
>
> . . . Among the worst plays of the Broadway season.[22]

Morrison points out that occasionally a playwright will deliberately select an inflammatory subject in the belief that this will help to ensure success at the box office. He agrees that a controversial subject may intensify interest

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[21]Variety, November 17, 1948, p. 58.

[22]Herald News, January 6, 1975, p. 22.

in a play prior to its opening and even, if poorly written, allow the play to enjoy some initial success.

> "The Soldiers" is a clumsy work dramatically, but has aroused intense interest because of its subject matter, which includes the assertion that Churchill, while the British Prime Minister during World War II, conspired to murder General Sikowsky, the head of the Free Polish Government, in a plane crash. Those who have seen or read the play say it offers no evidence to support the charge.[23]
>
> "The Deputy" is a fairly interesting drama, however, though, primarily because of its subject matter and theme rather than the quality of its writing and presentation or its effectiveness as theatre.[24]
>
> The point seems to be transparent. If you're a poor dramatist and want to have a successful play, make it on a highly inflammable subject and include sensational charges against a famous personage. With that formula, it seems, you can't miss.[25]

Does Morrison believe that a subject has to be relevant in order for a play to be successful? A cursory examination of his reviews would suggest he does. He criticizes Big Fish, Little Fish for "lacking urgency,"[26] and Red, White and Maddox for "lacking application and point in New York."[27] On the other hand, he praises Arthur Miller's An Enemy of the People for its "great pertinency to modern day problems

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[23]Bergen Record, November 27, 1967, p. D-9.

[24]Bergen Record, February 27, 1969, p. 49.

[25]Bergen Record, November 27, 1967, p. D-9.

[26]Bergen Record, March 16, 1966, p. 39.

[27]Herald News, January 27, 1969, p. 25.

and mores,"[28] and accords similar approval to a revival of Awake and Sing, for its "surprising relevance."[29]

Another major concern of Morrison's regarding the commercial viability of a play is theme. "As an old Shubert Alley adage has it, to be successful, a play must have a clearly definable theme . . . which can be expressed in a short sentence."[30]

The absence of such a theme was, in his opinion, a significant flaw in Tennessee Williams' Slapstick Tragedy.

> Dual-bills of one-act plays are rarely popular, and there's not likely to be an exception with "Slapstick Tragedy". . . Since the plays are by Tennessee Williams, they contain vivid writing and contend for general acceptance . . .
>
> But a play should have a comprehensible theme . . . and neither "The Mutilated" nor "The Gnadiges Fraulein" quite comes to the point. In general, both pieces express the author's familiar appealing sympathy for weak and helpless people, particularly women. But while it's possible to agree with him in principle, it's hard to follow him specifically.[31]

Not only must the theme be clearly defined, it should also not be complicated. The problem with Morris L. West's Daughter of Silence to Morrison is its multiplicity of themes.

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[28]Variety, January 3, 1951, p. 27-S.

[29]Herald News, June 15, 1970, p. 18.

[30]Herald News, February 19, 1975, p. 38.

[31]Herald News, February 23, 1966, p. 65.

> The stage edition of "The Daughter of Silence" opened last night . . . The book will be published next week. The play's flaws are not so much those common to converted novels as of inexpert dramatists. It is one of those cases in which the intention can be respected more than the accomplishment can be admired.
>
> Perhaps it's best in circumstances such as this to stress the fundamentals. Well then, "Daughter of Silence" is a drama about a girl who murders the mayor of an Italian village and the question of her guilt or innocence. The principal scenes involve her trial, but the author is clearly concerned not only with the story itself, but also with such eternal variables as morality, justice, law, the nature of guilt and innocence, the kinds and degrees or responsibility, the various forms of love, and so on. Thus its a play with philosophical overtones.
>
> Although multiple themes may be acceptable in fiction . . . they're apt to be treacherous in the theatre.[32]

Morrison is not above criticizing the substance of a play's theme, particularly if he thinks it is morally repugnant or intellectually bankrupt. He found the 1975 "so-called rock opera, 'The Lieutenant' . . . about an incident closely resembling the My Lai massacre,"[33] to be guilty of the former and, therefore, "an ineffectual show both as dramatic art and entertainment."[34]

Ronald Ribman's The Poison Tree was a poor prospect for popular acceptance because its theme was intellectually shallow. The play, in Morrison's opinion, was "moving but trite," because "its theme was merely a hackneyed cliche of

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[32]Bergen Record, December 1, 1961, p. 65.

[33]Herald News, March 28, 1975, p. 6.

[34]Ibid.

little substance."[35]

Morrison's criticism of Ribman's play for its lack of "suggestion for improvement or positive approach"[36] is indicative of his belief that the most successful Broadway shows offer positive, life affirming themes. Indeed, for Morrison, the Broadway theatre is the "theatre of affirmation." He wrote of the success of 1776 and Man of La Mancha:

> Both have affirmative themes, in contrast to much of today's theatre and other forms of art.
>
> "1776" seems to say that the Founding Fathers, though disarmingly human, had essential greatness, and that the Declaration of Independence, despite its imperfections was a milestone in the progress of mankind. "Man of La Mancha," of course, glorifies human aspiration, particularly in its big song number "The Impossible Dream."[37]

Sometimes, however, a clear, uncomplicated and affirmative theme is not enough if the theme is insufficiently dramatized. Such was the case with The Trial of the Catonsville Nine:

> The inherent drama occasionally emerges from all the words in "The Trial of the Catonsville Nine" . . . Much of the time, however, the basic theme of the Rev. Daniel Berrigan's play is obscured by talk . . .
>
> The essential theme of the Berrigan play, the struggle of human conscience

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[35]Herald News, January 9, 1976, p. 11.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Herald News, April 9, 1969, p. 24.

> against moral authority, is of the essence of great drama. It is the fundamental conflict in "Saint Joan," for example, and was the basis of Dr. Benjamin Spock's plea in his Supreme Court defense against charges of interference with the draft laws. The reverse application of the same principle (the supremacy of moral law over military orders) was the basis of the Nuremberg trials and the play "The Andersonville Trial."[38]
>
> The basic theme of conscience versus authority is not sufficiently dramatized or clarified . . . because of poor writing.[39]

A plot must have a clear story line to succeed. He found Moonchildren "a questionable prospect for Broadway success," because of the lack of such a coherent story line. The problem with Don't Drink the Water is the same. Although Morrison noted, "It's a rare treat to hear an audience laugh as the first nighters did at 'Don't Drink the Water,'"he cautions, "The big catch is that this dizzy farce by Woody Allen is little more than an occasion of jokes rather than a play. . . ."[40]

Although a play may have only one plot, subplots may be skillfully related to the main theme. He wrote of Henry Denken's A Far Country:

> . . . a gripping drama, superbly played. Contributing to its success are the usual subplots, all skillfully related to the main theme. One involves Freud's frightened mother and cautious physician friend,

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[38]Herald News, February 8, 1971, p. 23.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Bergen Record, November 18, 1966, p. 18.

> who fail to dissuade him from his misunderstood and therefore risky probings, another serving as an emotional framework for the main story.[41]

Morrison believes an effective plot must contain the elements of surprise, suspense, or both.[42] Time for Elizabeth by Russell Lewis and Howard Young was "just another box-office failure, because it failed to create suspense. Except for the briefly satisfying fireworks at the first act curtain, the authors never get the hero up a tree or make the audience care what happens to him."[43]

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[41]Bergen Record, April 5, 1961, p. 73.

[42]At times the lack of plot surprise is due to an anachronistic book. He writes that a 1954 revival of On Your Toes was a poor prospect for commercial success because:

> The book seems to be the worst handicap. The story, with a prolog about the hoofing Dolan family of vaudeville, telescoping 15 years to the bashful music professor who gets involved with a Russian ballet troupe, may have seemed ingenious in its day. But it's transparently contrived and awkward now. (Variety, October 13, 1954, p. 66.)

He also criticized the 1966 production of Pousse-Cafe, because of its predictable plot. The story, based on The Blue Angel, the German movie classic, "as vintage movie buffs may recall, involves the dignified, disciplinarian professor who falls for a cabaret performer and thereupon loses his job, and goes from humiliation to drunkenness to squalid ruin. It's possible," he writes, "to see how such a melodrama may have been powerful stuff 40 years ago . . . But in the mid 1960's, it is inescapable hokum, and has taken everyone involved with the project down with it." (Bergen Record, March 21, 1966, p. 48.)

[43]Variety, September 29, 1948, p. 74.

Howard M. Teichmann's Julia, Jake and Uncle Joe neglected "to provide more than a suggestion of plot, so there's little suspense and only mild interest."[44] Elick Moll's Seidman and Son was a poor prospect for success. "There's no escaping the fact that nothing vital happens. Nobody is stuck up a tree or hanging from a cliff, so there's nothing to be much concerned about."[45]

He believes that excitement must begin early in a play. A delay, especially in a melodrama, can mean disaster.

> Although the British are masters of melodrama, they occasionally seem unable to resist interminable preliminary scenes. In the case of "The High Ground" . . . the introductory scenes stretch into two acts . . . When authoress Charlotte Hastings finally comes to the point, about 10 o'clock, she yanks the audience to rapt attention, but by that time it hardly seems worth the patience it has required . . . the excitement is long overdue . . . So the production is doubtful box office.[46]

He finds the same problem with the 1967 production of Dr. Cook's Garden:

> The excitement is too long coming. The first two acts are too slow, and allow the audience time to reflect and note the holes in the plot. The delayed thrill is the play's greatest weakness.[47]

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[44]Bergen Record, January 30, 1961, p. 27.

[45]Bergen Record, October 16, 1962, p. 49.

[46]Variety, February 28, 1951, p. 58.

[47]Bergen Record, September 26, 1967, p. B-18.

Morrison also believes that most commercially successful plays have satisfying or happy endings. His review of John Osborn's Point of No Return is especially interesting in this regard.

> "Point of No Return" is professional theatre in the best sense. It is distinguished theatre and, which doesn't always follow, eminently commercial theatre . . .
>
> Except for the ending, the play apparently follows the identically-titled John P. Marquand novel closely. An ironic commentary of upper-class American life, it deals with a lower-Connecticut couple, typical but not average, who play the social career game of the station wagon set, polishing apples so he'll land the vice-presidency of the Manhattan bank where he's a junior executive. But on a visit to his small Massachusetts hometown, Charley re-experiences in flash-back several formative events of 20 years before, and he returns home to find himself not only independent of the vice-presidency and even the bank itself, but dissatisfied with the shallowness and pretensions of his business-social life and determined to be himself thereafter.
>
> The final scene departs from the novel by having Charley not only get the vice-presidency, but also declare his independence to the bank president and by implication establish his life on a new basis of self-respect, instead of reverting to the boot-licking, keeping-up-with-the-Joneses treadmill. Whether this ending is "artistic" or even logical is at least debatable. It apparently contradicts the basic theme and title of the novel, which argues that there is a point beyond which a man cannot turn back and remake his life. But the present conclusion is clearly more satisfying to an audience. Thus it is more "commercial" and, at least for the Broadway theatre, more successful.[48]

Beyond the qualities of surprise and suspense, a

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[48]Variety, December 19, 1951, p. 58.

successful play must have the almost mystical quality of what Morrison terms, "verve." For Morrison, this quality is associated with the moments in a play that raise it above the category of the "merely" pleasant. He refers to this idea in his review of Look to the Lilies.

> There's a pleasant feeling about"Look to the Lilies". . . There are also nice things about this new musical. The question is, however, whether a pleasant feeling and some nice things are enough for a Broadway musical show.
>
> The Styne and Cahn songs are melodic and lively . . . and the performance as a whole is--yes, pleasant. But"Look to the Lilies" has no inspired moments to catch the imagination and enthusiasm of an audience. It's moderately enjoyable but not exciting . . . In general, though,"Look to the Lilies"comes down to that sad limitation--just pleasant.[49]

In another column, entitled, "'Shenandoah' Lacks Verve, But . . ."[50] the same idea appears. Shenandoah is praised as "a moderately good musical," that is "pleasant in a somewhat traditional way . . . but, the show probably won't go into anyone's dream book of unforgettable evenings . . . While "Shenandoah" offers an agreeable evening, however, it lacks tingling moments . . ."[51]

He suggests that "verve" pertains to a certain "story strength," a sense of power and drive that is predicated on action rather than mood or symbolism.

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[49]Herald News, March 30, 1970, p. 16.

[50]Herald News, January 8, 1975, p. 12.

[51]Ibid.

> "The Wisteria Trees" is absorbing but unexciting. Despite its distinguished authorship, stunning production, superb direction and persuasive performance, it remains curiously untheatrical. . . .
>
> The work is . . . based on Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard." Despite liberal adaptation here and there, it retains the essential outline and quality of the original . . . And, like Chekhov, the new version relies on character and mood rather than action.
>
> The result is steadily interesting, but somewhat static and . . . oddly remote. Yet, "The Wisteria Trees" is agreeable enough, at times even fairly touching. It is a compassionate tale, retaining much of Chekhov's gentle, rueful humor. But like the doomed characters with whom it deals, it seemed a bit anemic, ineffectual and, in the end, disappointing.[52]

To Morrison, the emotional response of an audience to any serious play is of paramount importance. "A play that does not give you an emotional response, that does not take you out of yourself by permitting you to identify with the characters, cannot succeed."[53]

This concept underlies much of Morrison's commercial predictions. In his evaluation of the commercial prospects of David Merrick's A Patriot for Me, he considers its assets: "its fine theatricality, stunning and elaborate production and interesting and provocative situations."[54] On the other hand, "its negative factors included high production costs, an unsavory hero, and overwriting."[55] But the most signifi-

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[52]Variety, April 5, 1950, p. 58.

[53]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, November 10, 1974.

[54]Herald News, October 6, 1969, p. 8.

[55]Ibid.

cant element in estimating future success or failure was the fact that, "it lacked the vital element of emotional involvement."[56]

He believes that emotional impact is far more important to the success of a serious play than any other single factor. He writes:

> Tennessee Williams'"The Night of the Iguana" is anything but a perfect play . . . the first act is cluttered with non-essential characters and incidents, and it is not until the final scenes that interest is focused on the mutually dependent spinster and the former preacher . . .[57]

Add to that subject matter that he describes as "squalid,"[58] and one would ordinarily expect the makings of a disaster. However, "though it is technically faulty, it is emotionally rewarding."[59] And so, a near miss is transformed into a near success.

Joseph Kramm's The Shrike, illustrates the same point.

> Although the morbid quality of "The Shrike" will limit its mass popularity, the play's suspense, sympathetic appeal and the intensely personal impact (which strikes at an almost universal secret terror) should give it a healthy run.[60]

If a serious drama dealing with essentially "unpleasant" material is to succeed, emotional impact, in Morrison's

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[56]Ibid.

[57]Bergen Record, December 29, 1961, p. 15.

[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Variety, January 23, 1952, p. 58.

opinion, is not enough. The audience must be "uplifted," that is, inspired, enlightened, or both. He states this notion in his review of Garson Kanin's A Gift of Time.

> "A Gift of Time" obviously has something compelling to say, but, Garson Kanin and his associates haven't succeeded in saying it clearly.
>
> Why ask an audience to share the ordeal of slow certain death by cancer? Since the subject is essentially unpleasant, the object must be to offer some compensation, some ground for solace or comfort, some nugget of wisdom or philosophy or faith. Since "A Gift of Time" provides no such enlightenment, or inspiration, it clearly fails.[61]

He found Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman "depressing," but predicted its success[62] because of the principle which reappears in many of Miller's plays, that we must be true to ourselves. Success at the expense of being untrue to ourselves is not success at all.

> Willy Loman says, "you've got to be liked--well liked." Miller is saying that's a false value. We see the same thing in 'All My Sons." The father had used bad engine parts in planes, causing the death of a son. When he tells his surviving son that he did it for him, the surviving son responds, "How dare you!" That's Miller's major theme of responsibility at work.
>
> In short, although these characters are depressing, we learn something from them. There is a point there. He's not trying to make you feel better, he's trying to make you feel stronger.[63]

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[61] Bergen Record, February 23, 1962, p. 46.

[62] Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1976.

[63] Ibid.

He enjoyed Bertolt Brecht's Galileo for similar reasons, finding it "a fine play" and a "gripping treatment of an enthralling subject."[64]

> Brecht, who has become a sacrosanct name in recent years, almost justifies his reputation, if not the idolization of his large cult, with this probing, cumulative and inspiring drama about the great Italian scientist who was forced by the church to recant but nevertheless revolutionized not merely astronomy, mechanics and physics, but scientific thought itself. . . .
> . . . The fate of the great man is never indicated in advance and even though his actual history is well known the final scenes have an ironic and uplifting twist and emotional pull.[65]

Generally, Morrison finds "intellectual" plays too impersonal to achieve any sort of meaningful audience contact. He found Paddy Chayefsky's The Passion of Josef D. "of greater interest to history buffs than theatre addicts." Aside from its lack of dramatic power he noted that the play's message, "is merely a repetition of the old, old truisms that age and experience bring disillusionment and that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. In the present case, these truths tend to seem general rather than personal and remote rather than compelling."[66]

Morrison criticizes Brechtian techniques designed to "depersonalize" plays wherever they may appear. In a review of the 1964 production Oh What a Lovely War, he

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[64]Bergen Record, April 14, 1967, p. C-19.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Bergen Record, February 12, 1964, p. 5.

praised the work to the extent that it departed from Brecht's principles:

> The treatment is in the rather loose form of a revue or charade, with a strong flavor of Bertolt Brecht and a little suggestion of the "Living Newspaper" shows of the old Federal Theater. The savagely sardonic point is ridicule of the old-fashioned glorification of war.
>
> In general, the technique involves singing and morale-boosting songs and quoting absurd official statements of the time, in contrast to screened photos of the terrible battle scenes and projected casualty figures.
>
> The show is in two acts, and doesn't come to life until just before the intermission. The second act, more direct, accurate, and stinging, has greater impact. And because it gets away from the Brechtian principle of impersonality as it concentrates on the late Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig as the prime but typically pugnacious, vainglorious and bull-headed militaristic villain, it has greater dramatic cohesion and emotional effect.[67]

He makes a similar observation about Peter Ustinov's "comedy-drama," The Unknown Soldier and His Wife. He dislikes the fact that Ustinov "borrowed some of the Bertolt Brecht technique in this slowly gathering story of the eternal warrior who through the ages has died a useless death in stupid wars, leaving only the endless misery of his survivors."[68]

Often associated with the impersonal, intellectual play is the quality of "talkiness" or "philosophizing,"

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[67]Bergen Record, October 1, 1964, p. 65.

[68]Bergen Record, July 7, 1967, p. B-21.

that also limits a play's chances at the box office. "Talkiness," writes Morrison, "means that the play stresses conversation rather than physical action."[69] He describes Edna St. Vincent Millay's Conversation at Midnight as a "bore" because of its "talkiness."

> The actors in"Conversation at Midnight"keep lying on the floor of the stage perhaps from exhaustion. The audience is less fortunate, having to remain in more or less sitting position as the interminable palaver goes on. But nothing is perfect, of course--and even lying down, it's probably still possible to hear.
>
> "Conversation at Midnight". . . is a sort of hifalutin fraternity house bull session, an uncontrolled outburst of what Chekhov's Colonel Vershinin . . . calls philosophizing. What it's doing on Broadway passes understanding. . . .
>
> There are three endless acts of numbing gab, during which at least two of the participants get soused, a couple of near-fisticuffs occur and several times a few of the men doze a bit. There's no story, no sustained action, no central or compelling character and no basic conflict.
>
> "Conversation at Midnight". . . may be or have been when it was written, in the late 1930's, interesting to read. It is hopelessly unsuited to the stage.[70]

He observed the same fatal qualities in Sidney Kingsley's Darkness at Noon which he found a "plethora" of philosophical conversation in which "even the drama's exposure of the moral bankruptcy of Soviet policy is for the most part expressed in esoteric philosophical palaver."[71]

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[69]Herald News, October 11, 1973, p. 29.

[70]Bergen Record, November 13, 1964, p. 65.

[71]Variety, January 17, 1951, p. 58.

Although he admits being a "soft touch . . . for anything sentimental or emotional,"[72] Morrison is quick to point out that Broadway audiences also exhibit the same preference. Indeed, it is a quality that is often associated with successful shows, particularly musicals and comedies.

> The resentment of some people to anything sentimental is curious but undeniable. As the late Oscar Hammerstein 2nd. once observed, most of the successful musicals in stage history have been sentimental--they have pleased the public, if not the critics. The record bears him out.
>
> Of the Broadway musicals which have had runs of more than 1,000 performances, the ones whose flavor has been basically sentimental include "Fiddler on the Roof," "Hello Dolly," "My Fair Lady," "Man of La Mancha," "Oklahoma," "South Pacific," "Mame," "The Sound of Music," "The Music Man," "Funny Girl," "Promises, Promises," "The King and I," "1776," "Guys and Dolls," "Annie Get Your Gun," "Kiss Me, Kate," "The Pajama Game," and "Damn Yankees."[73]

Although Morrison believes that sentimentality can enhance the commercial prospects of a play, he also realizes that if overdone, it can destroy a show.

> Perhaps with more restraint and a little more imagination, "Angel in the Pawnshop" might have been a delightful play. It has an appealing premise and many nice little touches, but . . . its presentation is sticky with sentimentality. The result rates as a near miss.
>
> The atmosphere and style of the show suggest Saroyan's "Time of Your Life," but is apparently intended as a parable about innocence, kindliness, love, violence and death.

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[72]Herald News, July 10, 1969, p. 34.

[73]Herald News, March 9, 1973, p. 12.

> It has something of the Saroyanesque fantasy, without the exuberance that distinguished "Time of Your Life." And, especially in its final scenes, it becomes mawkish.
>
> In fairy-story fashion the play shows how a young woman, yearning for escape into the past, comes to the curio-cluttered hockshop run by a gentle old man she knew as a girl. She is followed by her gangster-husband who tries to force her to go back with him, and by a picaresque young writer, a friendly interne, a happy-go-lucky clarinet player and various other eccentrics.
>
> Between passages of saccharine conversation there are several touching moments . . . But the little fable is finally swamped in bathos as the gangster is killed, the girl marries the author and the pawn-broker symbol of God dies alone onstage at the curtain.
>
> Eddie Dowling, who apparently can't resist plays with a philosophical fantasy quality, not only wallows in sentimentality as the pawnbroker, but generally overplays, as if he were afraid the audience couldn't appreciate anything except the most obvious.[74]

Not only does Morrison favor sentimentality, he also believes it is particularly effective, if accompanied by liberal doses of romantic idealism.[75] It is precisely this combination of romanticism and sentimentality that Morrison finds in Broadway's most successful shows. Add to the

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[74]Variety, January 24, 1951, p. 50.

[75]Bergen Record, April 8, 1967, p. 18. His personal fondness for this quality, in part, explains his great admiration for such playwrights as Sean O'Casey and George Bernard Shaw. While romantic idealism is more obvious in the works of O'Casey, he believes it is also a chief characteristic of Shaw's work. "Although," he writes, "George Bernard Shaw pretended to be and may have secretly thought himself a relentless idealist and skeptic, he was," for Morrison, "actually an incurable dreamer and romantic." (Herald News, April 7, 1970, p. 13.)

aforementioned items some comedy, a small cast, and a single setting and one has "the almost perfect answer to Broadway's specifications for the ideal commercial success."[76] He wrote of Peter Slade's Same Time, Next Year:

> "Same Time, Next Year" is a virtually perfect realization of the traditional ideal Broadway vehicle. That is, it is a small-cast, single-setting, funny-moving romantic comedy. It's a cinch for success in New York, on the road, in stock and little theatres and motion pictures. A triumph for everyone.[77]

* * *

ACTING

Morrison is not interested in a play as literature. He maintains "it becomes theatre only in performance."[78] Since a major element in transforming the script into theatre is the acting, commercial success is largely dependent on this element.

He believes the real test of any actor is on Broadway and agrees with Martin Gottfried:

> The actor who has a drive to succeed is drawn--naturally where all the action is--and that is Broadway. To ask an actor to step back from this attraction is to deny his energy and psychology.[79]

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[76]Herald News, May 22, 1975, p. 21.

[77]Herald News, March 14, 1975, p. 16.

[78]Herald News, December 20, 1973, p. 43.

[79]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 38.

Morrison readily acknowledges that he does not know much about acting and finds it almost impossible to judge where the part ends and the acting begins,[80] but he is adamant in his concern that an actor be "believable," that he be able to convince the audience that he is, in fact, the character he purports to be. If he labels an actor's performance "unbelievable," it is understood that the performance has failed to meet his minimum standard. Of the 1977 revival of Caesar and Cleopatra, he wrote that Elizabeth Ashley, who played Cleopatra, is "merely unbelievable as Shaw's kittenish Egyptian queen. She appears to be an actress acting busily but without conviction. It's a curious situation as she clearly knows all the lines and reads them expressively enough and seems to be doing the right things. As a characterization, however, it has a mechanical feeling."[81]

Contrast the above review with his comments about Margaret Leighton as Mrs. Shankland in Separate Tables by Terrence Rattigan: "Miss Leighton makes it utterly believable and intensely moving . . . Her performance was an acting gem . . . spectacular."[82]

Morrison has devised a critical instrument to help guide him which he terms "theoretical casting."[83] While

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[80]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.

[81]Herald News, February 25, 1977, p. B-6.

[82]Variety, October 31, 1956, p. 64.

[83]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.

attending a play he tries to recast all the major parts in his mind; he asks himself, "How would so and so have played it?"[84] If he is convinced that another actor might not only add something to the role, but to the play as well, his review is affected.

"Theoretical casting" has far fewer problems than actual casting. There is no limit or budget to consider. The "fill in" actor does not have to be in the theatre. In fact, Morrison's substitute does not even have to be alive. He says, "If I were seeing a show today, I might ask, 'How would Clark Gable, in his prime, be in that part?'"[85]

An example of "theoretical casting" is Christopher Plummer's Tony Award winning performance in Cyrano.

> Sure it was a good performance, however, I'm sure if I thought about it for a while I could think of someone who could do so much better that it would chase him right out of the theatre because I did not think it was an outstanding performance.
>
> I know I could think of people that would be vastly better; for one thing, a younger Olivier would have been much, much better and I'm sure that there are others. Nevertheless, I gave Plummer a good review because you can't expect everyone to be as good as Olivier. I couldn't pan him because he isn't Olivier.[86]

In another instance, Morrison found the 1964 revival of The King and I, starring Rise Stevens and Darren McGavin

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[84]Ibid.

[85]Ibid.

[86]Ibid.

to be "a new tasteful production . . .," but "that is not to say this Lincoln Center revival is perfect, even nearly so." The answer is once again to be found in "theoretical casting."

> To anyone who saw the original production, with the fabulous Miss Lawrence, particularly anyone who had the opportunity to see it numerous times, any other star is bound to seem at least a little prosaic. . . . There is no escaping the fact that the bewitching personality of the glittering Gertie still hangs over the work. Miss Stevens is a very good Anna Leonowens . . . but she lacks the magic of a Gertrude Lawrence--as who doesn't?
>
> Similarly, McGavin does nothing to erase the recollection of the vibrant, instinctively authoritative, magnetic Yul Brynner. He's quite effective as the tyrannical but likable king, but Brynner was simply a case of the sort of miraculous casting that happens once in a generation.[87]

Morrison acknowledges that whenever he mentions his theory to actors, "they become very reticent and angry," and charge that his method is unfair. Nevertheless, he still uses the system, because "It clarifies the actor's performance in my own mind."

Actors accuse Morrison of generally using standards that are personal and subjective. This he admits but believes their judgments are equally flawed.

> While actors know the technical details of acting, they tend to judge the quality of a performance on personal and emotional grounds--just as everyone does including

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[87] Bergen Record, July 7, 1964, p. 41.

> critics, directors, producers, authors and, by no means least, the audience. In most cases, we think an actor is good if we like his personality, and vice-versa. So do actors.[88]

> A few people think Helen Hayes is a bag of tricks; that she is utterly phony; that all the things she does on stage are studied and insincere. All that means is that someone sitting out there does not respond to her personality. All of us respond to personality.[89]

Morrison does not let the personal warmth he feels for actors interfere with his critical judgments or commercial forecasts. Nevertheless, he tends to be more consistently favorable towards acting in his reviews than any other production element. This is probably due, in part, to his admitted uncertainty in trying to decide whether to attribute responsibility for a lackluster performance to the actor, the director, or the script.[90]

Morrison will rarely praise a script and criticize the actors. On the other hand, when he finds a script poor, he will often sympathize with the actors for having to endure such material. Typical of this tendency is his treatment of the actors in Sylvia Regan's Zelda.

> All of those involved in the project have unquestionably done their best, but what matters is that it's pretty much for nothing. . . . Ed Begley and Lilia Skala, the co-stars

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[88]Bergen Record, January 23, 1967, p. 22.

[89]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

[90]Bergen Record, September 9, 1969, p. 14.

> are clearly good actors making the best of poor material and it's natural for a spectator to be sorry for the supporting players.[91]

Morrison judges actors by the difficulty of the role as well as on their ability to overcome those difficulties.

> "Mourning" centers on the two opposing feminine characters, Christine and Lavinia. . . . The roles are superbly acted by Colleen Dewhurst as the passionate, treacherous mother and Pamela Payton-Wright as the implacable avenging daughter.
>
> Miss Dewhurst is an established star, a strong dramatic player and a striking stage personality. Miss Payton-Wright is well-known in the theatrical profession, but she is not generally regarded as a star and, at least at present, is not a magnetic stage personality. Partly for that reason, and also because the role of Lavinia is longer, more complex and covers a wider emotional range, her performance is perhaps more interesting.
>
> Her characterization is deceptive at the start, for she begins on a low key reserving her resources for the later bigger scenes. When the emotional highlights come, she reveals unexpected emotional power, and the climactic scenes of "Mourning Becomes Electra" are genuinely stirring.

> "The Dance of Death" is the principal attraction of the touring repertory . . . primarily because of Olivier's characterization of the vindictive, self-destructive non-hero, the Swedish army captain. The performance has been rated by a number of critics as the finest of his career.
>
> The role is showy, but difficult, with an extraordinary range of mood and emphasis, plus sustained tension. It has the sort of flashes of mounting fury of which Olivier is the master.[93]

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[91] Herald News, March 6, 1969, p. 30.

[92] Herald News, February 22, 1972, p. 22.

[93] Bergen Record, November 14, 1967, p. B-11.

Morrison tries to distinguish between an actor and a performer, either one having the capacity to alter a play's appeal. He believes that there is a place for both on Broadway. Performers are more often found in musicals or comedies and are usually noted for their virtuosity, poise, personal mannerisms and distinctive personalities. Actors, on the other hand, are often found in more serious plays,[94] and exhibit increased depth and dramatic intensity.[95] They often share the same qualities as those of the performer--but there is one major difference--a performer always plays himself, no matter what the role. In fact, audiences come to see him play himself. The actor must assume the role of the character he is portraying. Both types are needed for Broadway success.

Tallulah Bankhead is an example of a gifted performer whom audiences came to see, no matter what her role. He wrote of a "worn and dated" revival of Noel Coward's Private Lives:

> The play staggered under the hoked-up antics of Miss Bankhead . . .[96] Nevertheless, the army of Bankhead fans lap it up and clamor for more. That the actress largely ignores the character she is supposed to be portraying, using it merely to exploit her personality and display her stock of mannerisms obviously

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[94]Of course, as we shall see, there are many exceptions to these generalities and actors and performers can be found in all kinds of productions.

[95]Herald News, August 20, 1970, p. 24.

[96]Variety, October 6, 1948, p. 55.

> enraptures them. When she mugs, mews, bellows and generally turns the evening into a one-woman show, they revel in it. And the result is unquestionably box office.[97]

Geraldine Page, in Look Away, a drama about Mrs. Lincoln, failed for the opposite reason.

> Miss Page, who can be a restrained and convincing actress under proper circumstances, indulges all her old vocal mannerisms as the understandably embittered but distressingly loquacious woman. Under Rip Torn's . . . apparently indulgent direction she also reverts to some of her former "busy" physical traits. It is a performer on the stage with little suggestion of a believable character.[98]

The difference between acting and performing is revealed in Morrison's review of Fiddler on the Roof.

> Although Zero Mostel gave an extraordinary performance in "Fiddler on the Roof," the musical . . . is still an extraordinary show with Luther Adler as the star.
>
> If the song and dance treatment of the Sholem Aleichem stories loses something by the change in casting, it also gains. Or as Tevye, the philosophical milkman would say, "On the other hand in some ways it's better."
>
> Adler, who substituted as the star of the show for several weeks last winter when Mostel took a vacation, was surprisingly good then, but he's better now. His effectiveness was surprising the previous time because although he has long been a fine dramatic actor, he had never appeared in a musical. The improvement suggests he may have been doing some homework in the meantime.

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[97] Ibid.

[98] Herald News, January 8, 1973, p. 12.

> In the many dramatic scenes and even in certain of the musical numbers with other players, however, Adler gives a more legitimate performance. There's give and take between him and the others, so those scenes have more reality, depth and emotional quality. To that extent,"Fiddler"is a better balanced and more expressive musical now.[99]

Morrison is convinced of the importance of personality in a successful performance.

> Personality is what an actor has to sell in order to reach an audience,[100] not necessarily to satisfy them in an egotistical sense--He's acting to make people respond to a particular emotion he's trying to excite--whether it's laughter, tears, or just extreme interest. He uses every bit of his personality. If he doesn't, he's not an artist. He uses his voice, he uses his body, he uses his smile, he uses his eyes. If he's a tall man and he wants to be impressive he stands up. He does everything conceivable, and personality is part of it.[101]

Morrison is also cognizant of the importance of personality to performers.

> If you were spending eleven or twelve dollars for tickets to a show, in order to see Carol

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[99]Bergen Record, August 17, 1965, p. 38.

[100]Morrison observes "What most actors find is that if they have a personality that the audience likes, they had better get parts to fit it. The audience," he states, "is not going to want to go and see someone who they find vivacious in a tragic part. Instinctively, the audience will resent it. Katherine Cornell," he notes, "was expected by the audience to play romantic roles. When that kind of play disappeared, her popularity declined. True," he says, "there were many successive steps in the decline, but they all coincided with developments in the American theatre, especially the disappearance of the romantic play." (Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.)

[101]Ibid.

> Channing, you want to see the one that you like. Carol Channing is the last one to say she's creating a character in a serious scene. And Channing is an enormous success being Carol Channing and why shouldn't she?[102]

Along with the "theatre-electrifying magnetism of a major star,"[103] so important for commercial success, Morrison believes a star must exhibit "enormous authority";[104] he must be able to "take command and hold the stage."[105]

Star quality is almost mystical in its ability to transcend a part and be felt by an audience. Morrison observes that Ingrid Bergman was "the most magnetic element" in the 1967 production of O'Neill's More Stately Mansions, "even though her co-stars, Arthur Hill and Colleen Dewhurst had the better lines and more striking roles . . . It is Miss Bergman," nevertheless, he concludes, "who almost invariably commands attention."[106]

Morrison's review of the Lunts in Noel Coward's Quadrille notes how the mystical appeal of personality may overcome poor writing. He found the writing "uninspired," but thought the performance, "electrifying."[107]

> They are such interesting, captivating stage personalities that the effect is irresistably engaging . . . They convey an impression of

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[102]Ibid.

[103]Variety, February 7, 1955, p. 64.

[104]Herald News, November 1, 1970, p. 20.

[105]Herald News, September 5, 1969, p. 20.

[106]Bergen Record, November 1, 1967, p. 21.

[107]Variety, January 10, 1954, p. 66.

> theatrical perfection, an aura of affection, charm and even of gallantry. It's an intangible appeal and it is quite affecting.[108]

What are the requirements necessary for successful acting? Morrison sums them up: "intelligence, robust health and such physical attributes as stature, passable appearance and a resonant voice, as well as a suggestion of talent, a pleasant manner and genuine devotion . . ."[109]

Later, he was even more succinct, writing that only "three basic elements" were necessary for anyone interested in acting as a career, namely, "health, talent and determination."[110]

Morrison is concerned not only with physical strength, but with appearance and type casting.

> In actual practice, casting has almost always been primarily on the basis of physical type, with talent a secondary consideration. Tall, handsome actors usually get leading parts and short, fat people get character roles. For that matter men are almost invariably cast in male roles and women in feminine ones.[111]

He notes a curious exception to type casting:

> Few great stage actresses have been beauties . . . Beauty is not only not a requisite for stardom for a stage actress--it may even be a liability.

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[108]Ibid.

[109]Herald News, August 23, 1972, p. 28.

[110]Herald News, January 24, 1976, p. 20.

[111]Morrison realizes that the lack of parts for women in the theatre is a significant problem. He believes that this situation is due to the fact that "most dramatists are

> Perhaps audiences are too busy admiring the appearance of a beautiful woman to notice her performance. Or maybe it's just that most theatregoers, including women, find it hard to believe that a beautiful woman could also act. It has even been suggested that many playgoers, including men, unconsciously resent beautiful women.
>
> Whatever the reason or explanation, the fact is . . . the stage seems to place a handicap on feminine beauty. Of the established stars, most tend to be plain looking and some are almost homely--at least on a strictly physical basis.
>
> . . . all of them, without exception, can create the illusion of beauty. Possibly that's as good a definition as any of what constitutes a star.[112]

Morrison places great value on the technical ability of an actor to create illusion, "the illusion of beauty, of poise, of almost not acting at all."[113] It is for this ability that he admires Helen Hayes:

> Other actresses are more beautiful and more impressive-looking than Helen Hayes. Others have better natural voices for the stage. Some are comparable to her in technique, and a few equal her in magnetism and theatrical authority. But Miss Hayes, though not beautiful herself, can create the illusion

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now and have always been men." His solution is, "if women want more and better roles on stage . . . the obvious course is to create them by writing the scripts. There are," he writes, "no restrictions whatever on a woman's ability to get her play, T.V. script or scenario produced." (Herald News, July 29, 1975, p. 8.)

The results of more good scripts by women, in his opinion, "would revolutionize the theatrical arts. It would be a boon to everyone including male chauvinist humans." (Herald News, July 14, 1972, p. 10.)

[112]Bergen Record, March 7, 1966, p. 19.

[113]Herald News, February 25, 1970, p. 25.

> of beauty. She has the imagination, technique, and discipline to project virtually any concept or emotion required.
>
> Many authors and directors have admired and commented on her responsiveness and precision as an interpretive artist. She is like a rare violin in her ability to register instant changes of thought and mood. Given the proper role, situation, and direction, she can convey transitions of emotion as quickly as an audience can follow.
>
> She can be eloquently forceful or gentle, haughty or humble, dissembling or direct, exasperating or lovable, obtuse or acute, gay or solemn, funny or heart-rending--if necessary, with breath-taking rapidity . . . Her imperious monarch in "Victoria Regina" was brilliantly contrasted by her emboldened spinster in "Happy Birthday," and her mercurial Maggie Wylie in "What Every Woman Knows" was utterly unlike her literal-minded title portrayal in "Harriet."[114]

An important acting skill, Morrison believes, is concentration. He invariably finds this quality among successful stars. When an actor's concentration is weak, Morrison is sure to be critical. When Rex Harrison starred in a 1977 revival of Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra, Morrison was disappointed by Harrison's performance because he seemed "to lack his distinctive blend of concentration and precision." According to Morrison, "there was an impression of effort and, at the same time, remoteness, as though he were observing his own performance."[115]

He also holds that an actor must be highly disciplined. If he is not, Morrison believes the actor's performance

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[114]Bergen Record, November 19, 1966, p. 5-Magazine.

[115]Herald News, February 25, 1977, p. B-6.

will seem amateurish, unpolished and lacking finesse. Morrison reviewed a solo show in 1967 by Marlene Dietrich:

> The star is amazing to watch . . .
>
> In some ways, Miss Dietrich's style and technique is more fascinating than the actual show itself. Her concentration is tremendous. Everything she does has obviously been painstakingly planned and prepared and rehearsed. Her slightest vocal expression and tone are meticulous, all her moves and gestures and expressions are meticulously done.
>
> She seems cool and relaxed, with enormous poise and authority, and there is not the slightest doubt that it's all the brilliant result of extraordinary intensity and discipline. She works in a small vocal range and under severe control emotionally, but nothing is left to chance and nothing is wasted or lost.[116]

Morrison tends to laud simplicity and economy in performance, but he stresses attentiveness to detail. He thinks the best performances are those that are "richly detailed,"[117] a quality of the work of such professionals as Olivier, Hayes, Richardson and Gielgud.

Attention to detail is often accompanied by great technical finesse. Hume Cronyn, a favorite of Morrison's, has long enjoyed a reputation for technical proficiency in re-creating the most subtle detail. Morrison, nevertheless, was amazed at Cronyn's ability to blush on cue. "Any reasonably competent actor can laugh or even cry when the situation requires, but have you ever heard of anyone

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[116]Bergen Record, October 10, 1967, p. C-9.

[117]Bergen Record, December 31, 1967, p. C-31.

who could blush on cue? Hume Cronyn can do so, as those who saw Noel Coward in Two Keys observed."[118]

Morrison does not expect all actors to be as technically skilled as Cronyn, but he does set minimal standards of competency. Actors must be able to stand straight[119] and move gracefully. He thought that Lisa Minelli in Flora, the Red Menace, had the makings of a good performer, but found her "palpably inexperienced as was revealed by her poor posture and her inability to move gracefully on stage."[120] He described Sam Waterston, in Joseph Papp's 1973 revival of Much Ado About Nothing, as "an interesting actor who would be better if he had good posture" and noted the same about George S. Irving, a Tony Award winner for his supporting performance in Irene.[121]

Another hallmark of success is enunciation. His reviews include such phrases as "the speech is difficult to under-

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[118]Morrison was so intrigued by such technical proficiency, that he did some research and found that Cronyn's synthetically caused blush had only two precedents. He was particularly struck by George Bernard Shaw's reaction to one, that of Eleanora Duse in Magda, a play by Hermann Suderman in 1895. Shaw made a special point of describing how Duse, portraying a situation of intense embarrassment, blushed deeply and put her face in her hands.

"Shaw," noted Morrison, "expressed 'professional curiosity' as to how she had done it, and confessed, 'I could detect no trick in it; it seemed to be a perfectly genuine effect of the dramatic imagination.'" (Herald News, July 5, 1974, p. 14.)

[119]"Few actors," he writes, "even know how to stand these days." (Herald News, April 28, 1973, p. 28.)

[120]Bergen Record, May 12, 1965, p. 81.

[121]Herald News, April 18, 1973, p. 28.

stand,"[122] "enunciation of several of the leading players is faulty and the lines are sometimes unintelligible."[123] or "the actress is a beautiful young woman who sings, dances and acts skillfully, except for slightly unclear enunciation."[124]

Good speaking habits are equated with "artistry." He writes of the D'Oyly Carte Operetta Company:

> The excellent voices and precise enunciation of the D'Oyly Carte artists are an old story, of course, but it is impressive to observe that under these circumstances there are no footlight microphones or side-of-the-proscenium loud speakers to amplify the performance. The tones are clear and melodious and the words are intelligible . . .
> It's a rare pleasure to hear performers who are artists.[125]

Morrison believes that "Most of today's actors don't know or seem to care about the techniques and disciplines of the theatrical art" and "the situation detracts from the pleasures and satisfactions of playgoing."[126]

He blames this situation mainly on the Actor's Studio.

> Once upon a time not too long ago before the Actor's Studio discovered self-preoccupation and designated it as the Method, stage hopefuls were taught to speak audibly,

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[122]Review of The Island by Athol Fugard, Herald News, November 25, 1974, p. 38.

[123]Review of The Indians by Arthur Kopit, Herald News, October 14, 1969, p. 15.

[124]Review of Good Time Charley, Herald News, March 4, 1975, p. 20.

[125]Bergen Record, November 16, 1966, p. D-17.

[126]Herald News, April 18, 1973, p. 28.

> enunciate clearly, have good posture, portray the character written by the author rather than a pathological freak of their own devising and otherwise learn the technique and discipline of a very old art and a fine profession.[127]

In a review of John Gielgud in The Seven Ages of Man, Morrison expresses the idea that Method actors are inferior to and envious of the accomplished professional.

> Since it was Sunday and the other Broadway shows were idle, the Lyceum Theatre was dotted with noted actors last night for the opening of John Gielgud's limited engagement in 'Ages of Man."
>
> There didn't appear to be any members of the slouch, scratch and mumble school of acting on hand, but if there had been, they would probably have been exasperated at this fine classic actor's reading of the glorious language of Shakespeare.[128]

Morrison dislikes Method acting because he considers it non-professional and dilettantish and believes that basic acting techniques become clouded in an aura of esoteric reverence.[129] He agrees with Martin Gottfried:

> The Method's psychological realism was not disciplined by the day-to-day practicalities of the stage. It was not concerned with impersonating a character. It was directed to the thoughts of the actor himself. In associating his role with his own experience and pampering his ego, the Method actor merely played himself.[130]

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[127]Herald News, April 18, 1973, p. 20.

[128]Bergen Record, July 15, 1963, p. 47.

[129]Herald News, December 15, 1970, p. 8.

[130]Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 34.

Morrison finds "the whole rigmarole about motivation in acting," a cornerstone of Method acting, "to be like most such things, a silly elaboration of a sensible idea. All good acting," he writes, "is motivated, in the sense that the actor knows what the character is supposed to feel and project. In some cases," he continues, "actors do it by instinct and in others it is a conscious process--mostly," he believes, "it's probably a combination of the two."[131]

His point is that the Method approach is unprofessional. A working actor does not have the luxury, especially in the commercial theatre, of completely working out motivation with his director.

> There is a classic story of George Abbott, a no-nonsense director, and one of the most successful theatre artist-craftsmen of this century, and his reply to a Studio actor who kept holding up rehearsals to discuss self-analytical theories about his characterization.
>
> At the umpteenth question of what his motivation should be, Abbott replied pointedly, "Your salary."
>
> Moss Hart, a highly gifted author-director is supposed to have dealt somewhat similarly with another actor who insisted on having a reason for every speech or bit of business. After the repeated query, "why?" Hart snapped, "Because I tell you to."[132]

Morrison also criticizes Method acting for its heavy emphasis on emotional roles and its general avoidance of comic parts.[133]

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[131]Herald News, December 15, 1970, p. 8.

[132]Ibid.

[133]Morrison recognizes that this tendency is also true of most American schools of acting.

> The Stanislavsky theory tends to stress introspection and self-analysis in its approach to acting.
>
> For light comedy and especially for farce, more detachment is preferable. It's apparent, therefore that extroverts are apt to be better than introverts in the field of comedy. So while the Method is undoubtedly effective for dramatic roles, at least for some actors, it may be too ponderous and in some cases humorless for comedy playing.
>
> Not that actors capable of detachment are thereby disqualified as dramatic players. Some of the theatre's most brilliant comedians are also gifted emotional players . . . The comedians' point is that aside from individual attitude and personality, as well as approach, effective comedy playing is primarily a matter of technique. Learning it requires training and instruction. But most studios and schools nowadays concentrate almost solely on emotional dramatic acting generally with an introspective approach.[134]

* * *

DIRECTING

Of major concern to Morrison is the work done by the director, which he believes is "the most difficult element to identify in a stage show, either play or musical." He finds that it is easier to evaluate the script, including both its structure and dialogue, as well as the performances, although those elements are usually related to and affected by the direction."[135]

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[134]Bergen Record, April 11, 1964, p. 16.

[135]Bergen Record, April 20, 1967, p. D-15.

Recently, Morrison is more cautious about evaluating directing even in plays he likes. He writes of the director of That Championship Season, "Under A. J. Antoon's seemingly [italics mine] firm expressive direction the performance is utterly convincing and greatly moving.[136] He believes that "except for a very few people in a special position to take advantage of long experience and who thereby acquire sufficient judgment, practically nobody can be sure where the credit or blame belongs when a show is a hit or a flop . . ."[137]

He quotes George S. Kaufman who said, "the best direction is that which is so effortless and natural that it simply isn't noticed at all. Once it begins to call attention to itself, something is wrong."[138]

Morrison makes use of this approach writing about Neil Simon's California Suite: "the direction by Gene Saks almost defies detection--in a word, it's brilliant."[139]

Morrison does admit that, "occasionally, though, brilliant direction is so outstanding that it cannot be missed."[140] Such a production was Marat-Sade by Peter Weiss.

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[136]Bergen Record, September 15, 1972, p. 16.

[137]Bergen Record, March 10, 1969, p. 22. Nevertheless, "Whenever a show is in trouble during its pre-Broadway peregrinations there are apt to be rumors of major changes, with the chief subject of speculation the director. (Bergen Record, March 3, 1976, p. 44.)

[138]Howard Teichmann, George S. Kaufman: An Intimate Portrait, quoted in Herald News, June 26, 1972, p. 20.

[139]Herald News, December 15, 1976, p. 18.

[140]Herald News, April 20, 1967, p. D-15.

The play had all the ingredients ordinarily guaranteed to elicit a negative response from Morrison. He has always disliked long, involved, "jaw-exhausting"[141] titles, the likes of The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis De Sade. The show is not pleasant and the action is "raw and crude"; clearly a product of the "theatre of decay, despair and decadence."[142]

He abhorred the Brechtian form of the play, and yet, he describes the production as "a must-see for theatre buffs" because of the "brilliant staging by the noted British director, Peter Brook. The script is unquestionably an extraordinary work, but it's the incredibly eloquent and inventive direction that creates the marvelously detached and morbidly convincing performance."[143]

He writes similarly about the potential for success of the 1975 production of Chicago.

> Bob Fosse's choreographic staging and the elaborate physical production [were] the outstanding elements in"Chicago". . . There's a number in the second act called "Razzle-Dazzle" and that might be a more appropriate title for the show.
>
> To a considerable extent Bob Fosse has done with"Chicago"what he did so brilliantly three seasons ago with"Pippin." That is, he has taken rather ordinary material and tripped it up with electrifying dancing and

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[141]Bergen Record, December 28, 1965, p. 18.

[142]Ibid.

[143]Ibid.

> constant movement, plus a spectacular production so there is unflagging interest and a sense of excitement.[144]

Occasionally, Morrison does challenge what he thinks is particularly bad direction. He reviews a 1969 revival of Hamlet:

> . . . Even a play as great as "Hamlet" isn't foolproof . . .
>
> Ellis Rabb, the talented artistic director of the APA Repertory, must clearly be held responsible for this embarrassing venture. He is not merely the title player in the production, but staged it and is thus at least partly to blame for the muddled concept, the wooden and ill-spoken general performance and to a considerable extent for the awkward individual portrayals.[145]

Morrison recognizes different directorial styles in the approach to acting with the ultimate effect on the play's potential for success.

Some directors begin their careers as dancers and choreographers before going on to directing and emphasize movement, style and spectacle. Generally he finds that such directors excell in musicals but rarely succeed otherwise. Both Jerome Robbins and Gower Champion "have demonstrated fine talent as directors of musical shows, both have failed at every attempt at staging a straight play."[146]

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[144]Herald News, June 4, 1975, p. 37.

[145]Herald News, March 4, 1969, p. 18.

[146]Bergen Record, April 20, 1967, p. D-15.

On the other hand, "Such established directors as George Abbott and Joshua Logan, to cite two obvious examples, have had repeated successes with plays and musicals."[147] The latter two represent the kind of director who approaches his work from an actor's point of view. "Logan, who was originally an actor, apparently still has a hankering to perform on stage. He's usually willing to discuss characterization and motivation with members of the cast and doesn't hesitate to go onstage during a rehearsal to show how he wants a part played."[148]

Harold Clurman represents still another directorial style. "Paid to be primarily a lecturer when he directs, he gives frequent long talks,often of a philosophic nature, with many illustrative anecdotes," and does "apparently little actual directing."[149]

There is also the director "coach," the type of director who works with his actors in a very private way. The late George S. Kaufman was a "whispering director." He rarely made suggestions aloud, but would take the actor aside and explain his ideas quietly."[150]

There is the "autocratic" director as exemplified by George Abbott, who "has awe-inspiring authority, knows exactly what he wants, makes specific suggestions, and has

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[147]Bergen Record, April 20, 1967, p. D-16.

[148]Ibid.

[149]Ibid.

[150]Ibid.

little patience with interpretive theorizing."[151]

His opposite is the laissez faire director, such as an Arthur Hopkins, who was "reputed to give practically no direction at all. In fact "the late Robert Benchley, when drama critic for the New Yorker Magazine once referred to Hopkins as using the 'honor system' of staging."[152]

Another type of director falls someplace between the two extremes. The director gives limited guidance to the actor, but at the same time expects the actor to do what he wants. Logan, Guthrie, and Kaufman are examples of this latter type.

Morrison is intrigued by different variations in technique among directors, but believes that a director's method of dealing with his actors is only valid if it works and produces success. In addition, "Maintaining authority is an absolute requisite for a director . . ." There are "few things as destructive to staging or more demoralizing to a cast than a rebellious actor, particularly if he has a bullying manner and a loud vehement voice."[153] Morrison believes that there can be "only one captain on a ship." Stage directing is an expression of a personal artistic conception of only one man, and that conception must be right for the play if it is to succeed.

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[151]Ibid.

[152]Ibid.

[153]Herald News, April 16, 1969, p. 59.

> It would be hard to imagine a more fantastic production than Peter Brook's superbly imaginative staging of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" . . .
>
> As a director, Brook is not a self-effacing man, and since this is one of his more buoyant creations, his style and personality are constantly accented. In short, it is a director's show, with the actors subordinated and Shakespeare overshadowed, if not completely forgotten. Since the conception works, it's all to the good, at least in terms of the audience.[154]

On the other hand, when the director's concept is inappropriate, he believes the play is sure to fail. He considered Joseph Papp's 1974 revival of Richard III an "interminable bore." The production concept was awful:

> It is a far fetched headshrinker's interpretation . . . the Plantagenet monarch is not as much a human as a psychotic plotter and murderer.
>
> It's conceivable that Shapiro and Papp saw this corruption-packed melodrama as a comment on Watergate, and the analogy may occur to some playgoers. Such a comparison is stretching history beyond acceptance . . . The basic trouble with the production is in its conception.[155]

A good directoral concept succeeds if the director has the ability to sufficiently dramatize it; Morrison insists that a director exercise a "controlled craftsmanship."

> A basic merit of "Boy Meets Girl" was George Abbott's precise, economical direction.[156]

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[154] Herald News, January 21, 1971, p. 25.

[155] Herald News, October 4, 1974, p. 9.

[156] Herald News, April 14, 1976, p. 28.

> Donald McWhinnie's direction [of "Rattle of a Simple Man"] gives the impression of technical skill coupled with deftness and firmness--in short, naturalness.[157]
>
> Gene Saks deserves special praise for the brilliant, disciplined direction in "Mame."[158]
>
> Tyrone Guthrie's direction of "The Matchmaker" is an inspired . . . daring blend of subtle wit and beautifully controlled clowning.[159]

Often craftsmanship is revealed in the way in which "pace," defined as "variation in tone, modulation, subtlty, or control"[160] is handled.

> Jack Cole staged the production with the headlong speed and roar--and expressionlessness--of a passing freight train.
>
> The performance opens with an atmospheric but rather pointless dance in Gaelic idiom and presently bursts loudly into the story, with the impulsive Irish villagers shouting the dialogue, even in the romantic scenes, and the physical action portrayed with approximately the subtlety of a television wrestling match.
>
> At one point, the hero is finally provoked into throwing his perverse bride on the bed--which collapses--and a few minutes later he hurls her to the floor, drags her across the stage and then engages her bullying brother in the final wild-swinging slugfest.[161]

Slow pace can also be deadening. This was the problem with Lucille Fletcher's "non-thriller" Nightwatch. "It's

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[157] Bergen Record, April 18, 1963, p. 53.

[158] Bergen Record, May 25, 1966, p. 19.

[159] Variety, December 7, 1955, p. 64.

[160] Bergen Record, May 19, 1961, p. 47.

[161] Ibid.

terribly slow getting started and never acquires much pace or sense of excitement."[162]

To succeed, Morrison believes that every movement in a play must have some motivation that is discernable to an audience. If it is not, he is likely to find such movement "meaningless" and even more importantly, "unconvincing."[163]

Finally, Morrison believes that the director's role is to take a script and translate it to the stage"crisply and logically . . . by and large as the author wrote it." Good directing should clarify the meaning of the text. In general, if a script has the requisite basic merit, the play will be a success wherever it is produced, regardless of direction or cast.[164]

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CHOREOGRAPHY AND DANCE

In recent years the choreographer's importance has increased dramatically. Dance has been part of most American musical shows since they originated, but the style and importance of the dance has changed immeasurably since the Second World War.

> One observable trend of the last few years has been the growth of dancing in place of ballet in musical shows. Back in the pre-

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[162]Herald News, February 29, 1972, p. 10.

[163]Herald News, October 10, 1969, p. 34.

[164]Herald News, March 10, 1969, p. 22.

> World War II era, the dancing in musical comedy tended to be primitive. It consisted mostly of a line of cute girls kicking more or less in unison, and there was practically no connection between the routines and the show's story.
>
> One of the first musical comedies to use dance as a strong element was"On Your Toes."
>
> "Oklahoma," with undisguised ballet dancing staged by Agnes deMille was a revelation and choreography became an accepted word in the Broadway musical theatre.
>
> Miss deMille developed ballet further in"Carousel" and other shows, and such former ballet dancers as Helen Tamiris, Katherine Dunham and others made it a standard element of musical comedy. The old hoofing style of dancing disappeared. Choreographers like Jerome Robbins, Michael Kidd and Onna White, with a ballet background plus imagination and daring, changed musical comedy dancing even further.[165]

Morrison demands that the choreography be an integral part of a show and not merely a superfluous adjunct. He found Two Gentlemen of Verona bound to succeed, to be "a superb show" in large part because Jean Erdman's choreography was "pertinent and meaningful. There were numerous clever touches which gave droll point to the story, situations and characters rather than being injected for their own sake."[166]

Morrison recognizes that a choreographer, like a director, may produce egocentric displays that detract from the show and ultimate reception. He praised Harold Prince's A Little Night Music: "The few dance bits are

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[165]Bergen Record, April 21, 1967, p. D-11.

[166]Ibid.

brief and merely suggest a sort of social evening atmosphere without the elaborate interminable routines that serve as choreographic show pieces in some productions."[167]

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MUSIC

Prior to 1960, Morrison offered definite opinions about the quality of the music in a show, but now he tends to hedge nearly all his opinions with the phrase, "On the questionable basis of a first hearing."[168] He is not certain that he can analyze the market potential of contemporary music, having inaccurately evaluated the music in such previous hits as Man of La Mancha, Hair and Cabaret. "As almost everyone in the business will attest, it is practically impossible to judge a song at first hearing--or the tenth for that matter."[169] He quotes from Artie Shaw's biography, The Trouble with Cinderella:

> The noted band leader recalled an illustrative incident during his pop-recording days. It involved his revival of an old song, Indian Love Call.
>
> "Everybody around the RCA Victor studio thought we had a hit record," Shaw wrote. "As it turned out, the RCA Victor people were quite wrong. Indian Love Call had an enormous sale, but it wasn't because that song was a hit. It just happened to be on

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[167]Herald News, March 14, 1973, p. 25.

[168]Herald News, October 24, 1972, p. 22.

[169]Herald News, May 29, 1975, p. 23.

> the other side of a rather nice little tune of Cole Porter's, a tune that had died a fast death after a brief appearance on Broadway in a flop musical called "Jubilee."
>
> "I had just happened to like it, so I insisted on recording it at this first session, in spite of the recording manager. He thought it a complete waste of time and only let me make it after I had argued that it would at least make a nice quiet contrast to Indian Love Call.
>
> "When this 'quiet contrast' turned out to be what sold the record in the first place, what made it a big record in the second place, and finally one of the biggest single instrument hit records ever made by any American dance band--well, naturally everybody was quite surprised.
>
> "I was as surprised as anybody else. For although I had liked the tune I certainly hadn't thought of it as a hit possibility. Who would have picked a tune to be a hit after the public had already heard it in a show and apparently been willing never to hear it again? How could anybody in his right mind figure to make a hit record out of a dead tune with a crazy title like Begin the Begine?"[170]

Morrison has tried, to help him in his predictions, and without success, to obtain demonstration records from producers prior to an opening. On occasion he has tried to see a musical during its out-of-town tryout, but again without much luck. Most producers are reluctant, and understandably so, to permit a New York critic to see a show in its preparatory stages. Rodgers and Hammerstein, an exception, did allow Morrison to see their works out of town, because they believed, with Morrison, that to render a knowledgeable judgment about the music is too difficult after only one hearing.

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[170]Ibid.

Morrison would like, once again, to hear people whistling a show tune as they leave a theatre; at one time a sure signal of a successful song. Indeed, he believes that the current absence of whistling reflects a lack of new melodic music in our time.

> Maybe it was only that the evening was unusually warm and the windows were open. Perhaps it occurs regularly, but we just don't hear it. Anyway, it sounded startling when a man walked along the street last night--and he was whistling. People don't seem to whistle anymore.
>
> Is that a fact, or only an illusion? Are we too busy, too intent for the sort of idle errant-mindedness that whistling seems to involve? Has whistling, in one of those inexplainable phases of social history, merely gone out of fashion, probably to return in a few years with equal lack of reason? Or is there simply less melody than there used to be?
>
> One of the depressing aspects of the theatre today is the lack of melody in musical shows. The fabulously popular "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying" was an interesting and typical example of the sort of tuneless musical hits of the current stage. Yet it was composed by Frank Loesser, who only 15 years ago wrote the marvelously melodic"Guys and Dolls"and followed it a few seasons later with the richly musical"The Most Happy Fella."
>
> What has happened to Loesser? Where are the other composers who might be expected to be creating the melodies we might be whistling? Has their spirit been dampened by this morose, fearful, dis-illusioned generation? Has music itself been engulfed by the din of rock and roll, the cacophony of the Beatles? Whistling used to be a cheerful sound--why don't we hear it anymore?[171]

Without bothering to check precisely, it's fair to say that there were five or

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[171]Bergen Record, May 5, 1965, p. 77.

> six unforgettable numbers apiece in "Oklahoma," "The Sound of Music," "Kiss Me, Kate," "Annie Get Your Gun" and "Guys and Dolls" to mention a few shows at random. Moreover, those works of the giant composers were characteristic of the golden age of Broadway musicals . . .
>
> The basis of popular music is melody--and nobody can write melody anymore, at least not to compare with the richness and productivity of a Rodgers, Berlin, Porter or the other former greats. The same is true of the concert and opera field. Beethoven, Wagner, Puccini, Tcaikowski, Brahms, Mozart--to name some of the great masters, are still the standard of popular and critical approval.[172]

In his review of Heather entitled, "Flames Too Good for 'Heather,'" he not only labels this rock musical as "the worst production of the 1971-72 season," but also claims it was indicative of all such musicals of the 1960's.

> The musical stage is in one of the lowest periods in this century. When the reigning smash-hits of Broadway are tuneless, mindless, tasteless, talentless, monstrosities like "Hair" and "Jesus Christ Super-Star" . . . that affront the eyes and offend sensibilities, the theatre is in serious trouble.
>
> . . . The really depressing thing about shows like "Heather" is not merely that they are deadly bores, a waste of time and an imposition on audiences, but that they typify the musical stage of the 1960's.[173]

Today Morrison believes the critical establishment is apt to praise such an unmelodic composer as Al Carmines (of whom Morrison asks, "Pause and think a moment--how many

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[172]Herald News, May 16, 1973, p. 22.

[173]Herald News, May 22, 1972, p. 23.

Carmines songs can you hum offhand, or even recall by title?")[174] and condemn a well-known melodic composer such as Richard Rodgers (who he refers to as "the giant of giants")[175] as "a manufacturer of hummable pseudo-music."[176]

He notes that composer and lyricist Steven Sondheim has produced mainly unmelodic tunes.

> Sondheim was the subject of a wildly laudatory cover story . . . in Newsweek Magazine. He has won a number of Tony awards in recent seasons for his music and lyrics for Broadway shows. To read the piece you'd think the writer was talking about a combination of Schubert and Bizet.[177]
>
> Sondheim himself was quoted as saying some rather self-congratulatory things while at the same time making condescending statements about Rodgers and Hammerstein.[178]

Melody is so important to Morrison that, if a musical has melodious tunes, he might even overlook a poor script. He reviewed a 1973 revival of Desert Song.

> The situations and dialogue are frequently so absurd that the audience can't help guffawing. To make matters even worse, the staging is painfully rigid.
>
> The wonderful melodies redeem everything, however, or at least almost everything. Tunes like the title number and "Let Love Go," "One Flower in Your Garden" and "One Alone" filled the large

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[174]Herald News, May 16, 1973, p. 22.

[175]Bergen Record, December 28, 1963, p. 15.

[176]Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 208.

[177]Herald News, May 16, 1973, p. 22.

[178]Ibid.

theatre with music and the audience with elation. Moreover, they are beautifully sung by this excellent company. Under the circumstances, the preposterous story and trite lyrics are funny but unimportant.

All in all, "The Desert Song" is a case of lovely old music saving a terribly dated book. It seems likely to have a satisfactory run.[179]

* * *

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

Morrison dislikes theatre in the round.

Although circular stage production offers greater intimacy than proscenium and even more than thrust stages, there is sometimes a little difficulty about the intelligibility of the dialogue. That is, the lines may be just as audible as in a proscenium theatre, but you may not be able to understand the words when the actors are not directly facing you.[180]

The three-quarter stage is a modification of the arena, or circular stage, which means that the actors can at no time face the entire audience. At best, some of the spectators are afforded only side vision of the players, and in many instances, inevitably the actors' backs are turned.[181]

Visually, a playgoer may become reasonably accustomed, if not entirely adjusted to that. In the matter of audibility, however, it never ceases to be frustrating and at times exasperating. For although the actors' voices can generally be heard, their speech tends to be indistinct and unintelligible when their backs are turned.[182]

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[179] Herald News, September 6, 1973, p. 30.

[180] Herald News, March 26, 1976, p. 16.

[181] Bergen Record, June 18, 1965, p. 64.

[182] Ibid.

After a visit to the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, he wrote:

> The stage is of thrust style, but less extreme than that at Stratford, Ont., so the arc-shaped auditorium does not extend around so far and therefore does not require the actors to have their backs turned to a portion of the audience so much of the time, and involves less acoustical problems.[183]

He favors the proscenium arch and recognizes advantages for some productions on the thrust stage, but he is against the construction of "all-purpose drama buildings"[184] on the grounds that "the dual-purpose theatre adaptable for either proscenium or thrust stage productions" suggests, "a theoretical rather than a practical approach to drama. As the noted theatre and scene designer Jo Mielziner had argued for years, a dual-purpose stage usually means an unsatisfactory one."[185]

Morrison finds many "innovations" in theatre design impractical.[186]

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[183] Bergen Record, July 2, 1965, p. 53.

[184] Herald News, November 1, 1975, p. 20.

[185] Ibid.

[186] This, of course, does not mean Morrison is opposed to the use of the latest most up-to-date technical facilities. The opposite is true. Indeed, he finds even the newest Broadway theatres vastly inferior to most regional theatres because, "even the most modern Broadway houses have antiquated lighting, sound and hydraulic equipment. . ." He believes modern technical facilities cannot only improve the production aspects of a show, but can, at the same time, lower the cost of "the terribly high and rapidly increasing operating expenses of the Broadway theatre. With an up-to-date switch-

> The head of a college drama department commented, while showing a visitor around a reasonably elaborate playhouse, including a turntable stage, "I've noticed that whenever a new director arrives, his first production uses the revolve. After that, he virtually never bothers with it.[187]

> "Yentl," which opened recently at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre on Broadway, makes fairly ingenious use of a revolving stage. To a non-expert, however, it appears that the production could have been just as effective, possibly more so, by using props.[188]

Concrete based stage floors are impractical because their usefulness is restricted; they are "utterly unyielding and therefore unsatisfactory for dancers."[189]

Seating arrangements that might be aesthetically pleasing may be ill suited to the needs of the audience.

> A serious flaw in the theatre is the so-called continental seating arrangement, consisting of long rows of seats running the entire width of the auditorium, unbroken by center aisles. It looks attractive, but is inconvenient and therefore impractical.[190]

The several tiers of balconies that go around a theatre in a semi-circle "are better suited to nineteenth century grandeur than mid-twentieth century utilitarianism. All in

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board," he notes, "a single man can handle the lighting, sound, shifts of scenery and other duties of running a show; whereas it takes from five or six to 20 or 30 to run a production with the antique equipment in Broadway houses. (Herald News, March 26, 1976, p. 16.)

[187]Herald News, November 1, 1975, p. 20.

[188]Bergen Record, August 4, 1967, p. B-25.

[189]Ibid.

[190]Ibid.

all, it's evident that such houses were designed by architects more interested in beauty than in theatrical practicality."[191]

Finally Morrison argues that unless a production is the "right size" for the theatre, the show will suffer as a consequence. In general, he believes that smaller theatres are better suited for serious plays because of the needed intimacy, acoustics and lower overhead, while large theatres, because of their greater seating capacities make them more preferable for "high-operating-cost musical shows, ballets, operas, and the like."[192]

Thus the 1967 production of Romeo and Juliet was handicapped.

> The attempt to compensate not only for the vast dimensions of the City Center, but for the extraordinary width of its stage, was unquestionably necessary. Now that the company has become more accustomed to this theatre, the performance should improve, though it could never be expected to have the intensity and balance and impact as in a smaller house.[193]

A revival of Maxwell Anderson's Elizabeth the Queen at the same theatre failed for the same reason.

> The large theatre itself may have been partly at fault, for the dialogue tended to be imperfectly audible, or at least

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[191]Ibid.

[192]Bergen Record, June 18, 1965, p. 64.

[193]Bergen Record, February 22, 1967, p. B-24.

> blurred, and visibility is not all it should be from well back in the house. The City Center was originally the Mecca Temple, and intended for large scale presentations rather than straight dramas.[194]

Although Morrison does not consider scene design as important to success as writing, acting and directing, it may play a role in commercial success. He writes of A Chorus Line, "the brilliantly designed scenery featuring revolving paneled mirrors at stage rear, and the ingeniously complex lighting and costumes, contribute to the total effect."[195]

A play's setting, if poorly conceived, may work against the play's success.

> The physical production appears to be a major cause of the trouble with the New Phoenix Repertory revival of William Congreve's"Love for Love." Douglas Higgins must be primarily responsible for that, although a designer's scenic conception is almost always subject to the approval of the director and producer . . .
>
> Wherever the blame, the setting in this case amounts to an obstacle course. It is a virtual maze of separated platforms, stairs, flats, furniture and props. . . . It would be pardonable for the actors to have nightmares about the"Love for Love"setting.
>
> Because of the cut-up nature of the setting . . . many of the scenes have the feeling of crowding, with one section of the stage packed like a rush hour subway and the other areas empty. That's particularly true of the final scene, when the entire company is sardined onto a small platform.[196]

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[194]Bergen Record, November 4, 1966, p. C-32.

[195]Herald News, October 20, 1975, p. 19.

[196]Herald News, November 12, 1974, p. 22.

Morrison is especially sensitive to the effect that any set may have on an audience. In fact, his observations in this area tend to be more specific and detailed than his comments on other elements. His remarks often underscore a keen appreciation of the technical aspects of a production. Some examples:

> . . . The duplex-apartment setting by Ben Edwards is excellent within the obvious budget requirements, although its flimsiness is accentuated by the use of numerous pendant ornaments, pictures, etc., which shake visibly whenever anyone uses the stairs or shuts the door.[197]

> . . . An additional lapse by the designer was the absence of a ceiling on the setting, to throw the actors' voices out toward the audience instead of allowing the sound to be dissipated upward.[198]

> . . . Douglas W. Schmidt's setting seemed unnecessarily large and one item of furniture, a fairly large table, was placed all the way upstage and was never used. That suggests that considerable movement may have been eliminated during rehearsals and the tryout tour.[199]

> . . . Although nearly all the material shown in the photo projections is so-whattish (the co-directors tacitly concede its irrelevance by placing the company in front of the screens, so many of the pictures are hidden from the audience on the lower floor of the theatre), but shots of the John F. Kennedy funeral have a sobering impact. Other pictures of the Robert Kennedy and Rev. Martin Luther King assassinations and funerals are slightly less affecting, perhaps because they tend to be repetitious.[200]

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[197]Variety, January 17, 1951, p. 58.

[198]Herald News, May 7, 1971, p. 26.

[199]Herald News, December 10, 1975, p. 32.

[200]Bergen Record, January 27, 1969, p. 25.

He believes that the set must complement but not overwhelm the script and the acting. If the set is unusually conspicuous, he is convinced that, most likely, the play will fail. There is an old Broadway saying, he writes, "about how it's a dire omen for a new musical when the opening night audience comes out of the theatre extolling the scenery and costumes instead of the show itself."[201]

Morrison believes that any designer working for the Broadway stage should not only be imaginative and artistic but "a practical artist," as well, "who understands and appreciates the economics of the theatre."[202]

> The production of "Death of a Salesman" was an example of that. The project was budgeted at $100,000, but after reading and studying the play, Jo suggested a scenic plan that would require a single, skeletal setting instead of the several realistic sets called for in Arthur Miller's script.
>
> Elia Kazan, the director of the show and Kermit Bloomgarden, the producer, approved the plan and Miller agreed to do the minor rewriting necessary. As a result, "Death of a Salesman" cost only $60,000 to produce. Moreover, because of the simplified scenery, fewer stagehands were needed to work the show, and the running expense was lower. Also, for the audience, there were no waits for scene changes.[203]

He notes the converse with Edward Albee's Seascape, which closed

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[201] Bergen Record, November 16, 1967, p. C-19.

[202] Bergen Record, March 17, 1976, p. 42.

[203] Ibid.

> after its Coast engagement, because the physical production was too elaborate and heavy to be toured. The New York critics, not thinking of its obvious impracticality, praised the seaside setting of an imposing sand dune. But, the producers and the author-director must have been dozing when they permitted a designer to create anything so unwieldy.[204]

An important aspect of economic practicality in set design is flexibility. If a set is flexible, both a show's overhead and operating costs can be considerably reduced. Morrison commends James Tilton for designing an "interesting and flexible setting involving a turntable moved by the actors in sight of the audience, plus adaptable side panels for the change in locale"[205] in a 1966 revival of The School for Scandal and praises "the flexible, atmospheric physical production designed by Beni Montresor as a major factor"[206] in the 1965 production of Do I Hear a Waltz?

At the very least, he expects a set to clarify the time and place of each scene. He found fault with the 1964 Royal Shakespeare Company version of King Lear because, "the bareness of the scenery and the minimum variation in the lighting" made it "difficult to figure out the locale and the time of the scenes."[207] He believes the role of the set is to clarify the text rather than obfuscate its

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[204]Herald News, April 18, 1975, p. 14.

[205]Bergen Record, November 22, 1966, p. A-23.

[206]Bergen Record, March 19, 1965, p. 65.

[207]Bergen Record, May 19, 1964, p. 43.

meaning. He "panned" Rouben Ter-Arutunion's "scenic production" for Tennessee Williams' The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, because it had "about as much reason as a bad dream."[208]

Morrison realizes that there are designers who sometimes reveal greater vanity than actors,[209] and therefore he dislikes scene designs that are "artsy" and merely the product of "Show-off scenic designers who dwarf the play with their lavish settings . . ."[210] Such was the case with Santo Loquasto's "huge setting for Joseph Papp's 1975 revival of Ibsen's A Doll's House in which, according to Morrison, "the performance seemed lost."[211] It was also the problem with Max Gordon's 1951 production of The Small Hours which he found "a large production of a small play."

> . . . It is obviously second-guessing to suggest that that may be one of its major drawbacks, not only for the immediate reason of tough production and operating costs, but because the script's valid thesis and appealing qualities appear to be lost in the mountains of scenery and truckloads of costumes.[212]

Howard Bay's set for Cry For Us All was also found wanting:

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[208]Ibid.

[209]Herald News, February 18, 1969, p. 22.

[210]Bergen Record, June 10, 1967, p. 18.

[211]Herald News, March 6, 1971, p. 30.

[212]Variety, February 21, 1951, p. 60.

> Howard Bay's towering-turntable-mounted setting contributed to the same feeling of exaggeration, weightiness and superciliousness. If not actually unwieldy, it requires artificial movement and business for the players, and tends to draw audience interest to the mechanics of the show rather than to the characters and story.[213]

Morrison is not easily fooled by theatrical "gimmicks" that hide a play's imperfections and does not believe they can save a play.

> Basically the quality and dramatic impact of any show depends primarily on the script and performance--the writer and the actors. Gimmicks and gadgets and artifices may help or be merely distractions, but in any case, they're incidental.[214]

He wrote of Via Galactica, "A staggering amount of gimmickry is exhibited on the stage, but the quality of the new musical is disheartening."[215]

Morrison is aware of the great technical strides lighting has taken since he first started reviewing.

> Although footlights--meaning the theatre--is a long established part of the language, it no longer has much practical application. For many productions there are no such things as footlights any more. Modern stage lighting is extremely complex, involving lights of many colors and degrees of intensity, directed from various directions and angles.

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[213]Herald News, April 9, 1970, p. 26.

[214]Herald News, November 1, 1975, p. 20.

[215]Bergen Record, November 29, 1972, p. 76.

> Easily visible at most shows nowadays are the lights mounted on small platforms at the front of the balcony, and even more evident are those in the house, above or around the boxes, or sometimes fixed to the proscenium arch. Not quite so easy to see are the ones frequently in the wings or above the stage, in the flies. Harder still to detect is back-lighting, from the rear of the stage.
>
> In general, modern lighting, not merely because of the more delicate and varied shades and intensities and the technical flexibility of the equipment, but because of the different directions from which it is used, is much more expressive and dimensional than years ago. For example, the old fashioned footlights tended to make the actors appear flat, whereas side-lighting gives them an added dimension. Also the intensity of lighting is now varied to create different moods and emotional atmosphere.[216]

Morrison has a sharp eye for technical proficiency and often makes keen observations: John Gleason's lighting for a 1969 revival of The Time of Your Life "helped establish the proper mood, though the vertical orange lights were unbecoming to the actresses."[217] Jules Fisher's lighting for No, No, Nanette was appropriate for the period in that he used "soft colors, including spots."[218] The American National Theatre and Academy's production of The Cherry Orchard "suffered because of the palpably makeshift lighting, which was an undeniable handicap."[219]

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[216]Bergen Record, July 27, 1965, p. 18.

[217]Herald News, November 7, 1969, p. 25.

[218]Herald News, January 20, 1971, p. 32.

[219]Herald News, May 7, 1970, p. 50.

He acknowledges that an important function of lighting is "to create theatrical atmosphere,[220] but he believes its primary purpose it to provide adequate illumination. He resents "Showoff lighting designers . . . who add arty dim lighting that leaves the actors virtually invisible,"[221] and often criticizes this practice. Sean Kenny's dim lighting for Oliver, "got interesting visual effects but made it difficult to see the faces of the players."[222] Similarly, he observed that the overhead lighting for the Yale University Theatre's production of We Bombed in New Haven created atmosphere, but was poorly done because "it failed to illuminate the actors' faces sufficiently."[223]

Of all the elements of production, Morrison devotes the least space to costumes and make-up. If the costuming and make-up doesn't distract, he usually summarizes with single adjectives and rarely goes into any detail. If an exception is to be made, it is only because the costuming is extraordinary and will promote audience reception. He wrote, for instance, about Lemuel Ayers' costumes for Cole Porter's Out of This World:

> . . . striking, especially for play-goers who enjoy the spectacle of male nudity (in almost every dance number the girls wear notably more clothes than the men, although diaphanous

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[220] Herald News, November 12, 1974, p. 22.

[221] Bergen Record, June 10, 1967, p. 18.

[222] Herald News, February 18, 1969, p. 22.

[223] Bergen Record, December 13, 1967, p. D-21.

> femme costumes are occasionally used effectively).[224]

He enjoyed John Napier's costumes for Equus, "especially the cagelike masks representing horses' heads . . . an imaginative touch . . ."[225]

Morrison is clear about what he does not admire in costuming. He dislikes "Costumers who slavishly follow idiotic style trends by providing sack dresses and miniskirts which look even worse onstage than off,"[226] and he is very critical of producers who "skimp on costumes."[227]

Costumes and make-up should not distract from the performer's role. He observed that in Joseph Papp's 1963 production of As You Like It:

> The make-up leaves something to be desired in several cases, notably in the distracting whitened eyelids of Miss Prentiss and Miss Fuller, and the bosom-accenting low, tight neck-lines of several actresses' costumes approaches the ridiculous.[228]

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[224]Variety, December 27, 1950, p. 42.

[225]Herald News, November 12, 1976, p. 22.

[226]Bergen Record, June 10, 1967, p. 18.

[227]Bergen Record, December 9, 1968, p. 57.

[228]Bergen Record, July 17, 1963, p. 60.

CHAPTER VI:

HIS ATTACK ON CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN THEATRE

Morrison, like other critics, has biases that affect his attitude toward a given play. "Nobody goes to the theatre alone. We all take along our likes and dislikes, our hopes and fears--in short, our prejudices."[1] Morrison is aware that he is "not the first critic who ever lived who did not have any prejudices."[2] In fact, he notes, "every time you write, you reveal something of yourself because everything you write is autobiographical."[3]

Morrison's prejudices are also significant in that they reveal what he means when he discusses a work in terms of "personal taste." For Morrison, as we have seen, reviewing is a highly subjective art in which the reviewer's judgment stems from his personal taste. Moreover, he believes that his taste and that of many of his readers is the same and, indeed, he is right.

The dictionary defines "taste" as "a personal preference or inclination or a discernment of what is aesthetically excellent or appropriate."[4] Morrison's approach to criticism combines both definitions. His

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[1]Bergen Record, March 15, 1967, p. D-16.

[2]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, May 28, 1977.

[3]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, February 4, 1977.

[4]American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, s.v.

"discernment of what is aesthetically excellent or appropriate," is based on "personal preferences or inclination," in short, biases.

It is only by understanding the nature of Morrison's prejudices that the word "taste" as it appears, for example, in any of the following excerpts can have any meaning:

> What's more to the point, at least for most playgoers, is that the number of good shows, including both hits and distinguished monetary failures, has been much greater than normal. There have been five money-making hits, and according to my taste, at least three other productions of acceptable quality.[5]

> There's one useful thing about a show as inept, tasteless and numbingly dull as "Fame." It emphasizes, at least by contrast, the superior quality of several other recent Broadway openings.[6]

> Compared with "Mandingo" little items like "Camino Real" and "The Balcony" are practically Sunday school parties."
> The Tennessee Williams and Jean Genet plays may be sordid and depraved, but this Jack Kirkland dramatization has the additional quality of tastelessness.[7]

Morrison's attitudes toward the world around him were shaped by the values and traditions of the late 1930's and 1940's. Despite the great social upheavals of that period, many in his generation believed in order, rationalism, the

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[5]Herald News, December 14, 1974, p. 12.

[6]Herald News, April 19, 1974, p. 10.

[7]Bergen Record, May 23, 1961, p. 47.

sanctity of the family, moral purpose, the perfectability of man, progress and man's future--values espoused by the "right-wing" critic.

> It means a belief in God, a respect for law, a love of country, a need for order, a sense of family, a concern with appearance, a willingness to be organized, a recognition of the good in social responsibility. It means an interest in melodic music, representational art, story fiction and rhymed poetry. It means a taste for hamburgers, Chinese food, pizza and ice cream. It means a belief in cornerstones of marriage, social systems, maturity. It means an acceptance of the various interdenominational, nonsectarian, middle-class values, ranging from the Ten Commandments to the Boy Scout oath. And, in general, the ethical foundation upon which Western society is built.[8]

Morrison, like many of his contemporaries, was unprepared for the sharp criticism of such beliefs in the theatre soon after the Second World War.

> In the twenties and thirties and part of the forties the American Theatre was aggressive, intelligent and dynamic, and it pioneered in many forms . . . After World War II, European and British writers struck out in a style that has always eluded Americans. The negative point of view about the whole structure of civilization, universal doom, madness, unhappiness. No Exit, Waiting for Godot, Rhinoceros, The Homecoming, all are devastating attacks upon normal values. They cut everything that is rational out from under us. . . . The overwhelming majority of these plays are critical and the most recent are the most

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[8]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, pp. 48-49.

> critical. In the twenties, dramatists attacked their subjects as if the inequities could be resolved. Some of the traditional optimism of America lurked behind most of the early plays. But not now. There is no conviction now that problems will be solved and that happy days are just over the horizon.[9]

The Second World War also had an effect on prevailing sensibilities in the United States.

> America grew up as its prewar culture grew outmoded in those six years. [The war] caused a life loss in the generation that was supposed to have accounted for our immediate future. And we had more than seen the atom bomb--we had actually invented it, developed it, used it. . . . The international political stature of our country became dominant and we assumed responsibility for the rest of the world . . . We were dragged into manhood.
>
> At the same time, the age spread of our population had shifted, with the average American becoming even younger. Our wealth, burgeoned by war, was used for the education of that youth.
>
> While the young were growing old enough to take over the reins of America, while the education was being absorbed and readied for use, the theatre continued into an artistic middle age. In short, the right wing grew fat.[10]

During the ten years immediately following war's end, it appeared that American drama was healthier than ever--that perhaps even a golden age had begun. Arthur Miller wrote All My Sons, Death of a Salesman and The Crucible in rapid succession. Tennessee Williams created poetic master-

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[9]Brooks Atkinson and Albert Hirschfeld, The Lively Years: 1920-1973 (New York: Association Press, 1973), pp. 95-96.

[10]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, pp. 18, 19.

pieces in The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. William Inge brought to the stage Come Back, Little Sheba and Picnic, and Robert Anderson began a promising career with Tea and Sympathy. "It really did seem as if they had slipped the gap opened by the departure into the right wing of the old order: Sidney Kingsley, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, Sidney Howard, etc. This was a false start."[11]

In a short time European negativism struck a responsive chord among American playwrights and soon began to take hold in the late fifties and early sixties.

> The age of conformity and of McCarthy terror drove men of sensibility into themselves. Young folk exiled themselves in the ghetto of their egos. The faceless world, all perpetual motion without any core of meaning, was to be shut out. "Contact," as someone has said about the new dancing, "went out in the fifties."
>
> Connection with that outside world now threatened with annihilation, became attenuated. Some solace (or drug) which might alleviate the pain of aloneness or sink us more deeply into forgetfulness was craved. To be "beat" became an ideal by default. This laid the groundwork for the dramaturgy of the maimed.
>
> The plays of Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter--usually presented at some distance from the theatre's supermarket--which were expressions of not altogether similar but of equally disabling stresses, became models for American writers. Edward Albee's permanent vagrant disturbing the complacent gent on the park bench is a youth who prefers contact through his own violent death at the hand of a neighbor to total neglect. At this moment Albee seems as representative of the early sixties as William Saroyan and Thornton

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[11]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 19.

> Wilder were, in embodying the spirit of benevolent reconciliation (or 'national unity'), in the early forties. Albee testifies to the agony of a society no longer real in which we try to live on debris of exploded faiths, a state which renders us savage.[12]

If Albee's "Jerry" represented the displaced, alienated, dissatisfied temper of the "left," then his "Peter" may have symbolized the false sense of security of Morrison's generation and of the theatre of the "right."

Herman Hesse, as early as 1929, forecast the spirit of this struggle of the sixties:

> Now there are times when a whole generation is caught . . . between two ages, between two modes of life and thus loses the feeling for itself, for the self-evident, for all morals, for being safe and innocent.[13]

During the sixties the new ideology of the theatre challenged the values of traditional Broadway with renewed intensity. The era was noted for its "seasons of discontent,"[14] and in Harold Clurman's opinion, produced a "dramaturgy of the maimed."[15] The historian Richard Hofstader planned a book about the times which he proposed to entitle "The Age of Rubbish."

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[12]Harold Clurman, The Naked Image: Observations on the Modern Theatre (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 112-163.

[13]Herman Hesse, Steppenwolf (Philadelphia: New Directions, 1951), p. 62.

[14]Robert Brustein, Seasons of Discontent: Dramatic Opinions 1959-1965 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965), p. 1.

[15]Harold Clurman, The Naked Image, p. 162.

For Morrison, it was the "age of ugliness,"[16] an era "when anger dominates nearly all forms of entertainment, or for that matter just about all the arts, and even today's life in general."[17] It was a period he dislikes intensely.

> Despite the talk of a so-called cultural explosion, the quality if not the quantity of all the arts appears to be in a period of decline. Music, painting, sculpture, dance, literature and even language seem to be deteriorating. All forms are apparently being destroyed and established conventions and standards of law, decency, morality, religion and respect for life itself are threatened . . .
>
> Plays . . . as vulgar, tasteless, and barbaric as the much-discussed off-Broadway melodrama, "MacBird," and as degraded if not evil as Harold Pinter's "The Homecoming," seem to be the order of the day.[18]

He recognizes that there had "always been ugliness and violence on stage. In Lear, for example, a character has his eyes gouged out." This isn't new, however:

> ugliness for its own sake was never as prevalent as it is today. I don't think that there was an effort to vulgarize language, to vulgarize the arts, to bring it down to the level of the gutter and to cheapen and destroy it.[19]

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[16]At first Morrison thought that the stage might be called the "Theatre of Ugliness," but he revised his opinion and was "more inclined to regard this as the age of ugliness." (Herald News, June 30, 1969, p. 27.)

[17]Herald News, July 10, 1970, p. 9.

[18]Bergen Record, March 18, 1967, p. 18.

[19]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

Morrison's sentiments are echoed elsewhere. Susan Sontag writes: "One of the primary features of literature (as of much activity in all the other arts) in our time is a chronic attachment to materials, belonging to the realm of extreme situations: madness, crime, taboo sexual longings, drug addiction, emotional degradation, violent death."[20]

Duncan Williams, author of The Trousered Ape: Sick Literature in a Sick Society, writes:

> In the various manifestations of the modern scene one finds (with few exceptions) an almost clinical obsession with ugliness, disorder and the more bizarre and degrading aspects of the human condition--a preoccupation with the violent and animalistic tendencies of man. No longer does literature, and I am using the word in its widest sense, attempt to satisfy man's need for beauty, order, dignity and a worthwhile ideal toward which he may strive.[21]

Joseph Golden relates theatre and society:

> Society gets the kind of theatre it deserves. If the society is troubled, inferior, or unresolved as to its ultimate commitments and its postures of faith toward itself, the theatre will mirror the trouble, the inferiority and the lack of resolution with a vividness and clarity that is stunning.[22]

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[20]Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1961), p. 22.

[21]Duncan Williams, The Trousered Ape: Sick Literature in a Sick Society; A Study in the Influence of Literature on Contemporary Society (London: Churchill Press, Ltd., 1971), as quoted by Hobe Morrison, Herald News, August 7, 1973, p. 8.

[22]Joseph Golden, The Death of Tinkerbell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967), p. 10.

Morrison's review of Cabaret illustrates the effect of what he perceives as post World War II values adapted from material written earlier. It reveals specifically his antipathy to the changes made in John Van Druten's 1951-52 drama I Am A Camera in "an age of ugliness." The emphasis on "ugliness, decadence, hysteria and moral lethargy" that Morrison finds in the musical[23] contrasts sharply with values he finds in the original work, and mirror those qualities in our own era as much as they apply to pre-Nazi Berlin.[24]

> The emphasis, flavor, and feeling of the musical are utterly unlike those of the Van Druten drama, or comedy-drama. The principal locale is now the sleazy honky-tonk where Sally Bowles is a vocalist, rather than in the modest boarding house where the novelist has a room and the heroine comes to live. The accent is now on the loud, tawdry, cabaret numbers and humorless comedy, instead of the character of the shallow, impulsive, self-destructive but somehow appealing emigre English girl.
>
> Certain of the play's situations are also changed, presumably for the simpler requirements of musical comedy. For example, Sally is now presented as the novelist's mistress instead of merely his friend, and the aborted baby is his rather than an incidental former lover's. Also the circumstances of the other couple's planned marriage and the Nazi-Jewish angle are drastically altered, though not thereby clarified nor strengthened.
>
> In general, the effect of the musicalization is to substitute the blatant vulgarity of an early 1930's Berlin bordello cafe for the seedy ominous atmosphere of a rundown boardinghouse. In place of the dimension and sensitivity of the Isherwood, Van Druten drama,

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[23]Bergen Record, November 21, 1966, p. D-13.

[24]Ibid.

> the show stresses the lurid vulgarity (and frequently explicit homosexuality) of depression era German saloon entertainment.
>
> The merely implicit love, or more properly affection, between the pathetically hedonistic young heroine and the thoughtful, sympathetic but carefully objective novelist is now just a casual rootless sex affair. Also the tragedy of the young Jewish couple has been restated in terms of a semi-comic engagement between the gentile landlady and a Jewish shopkeeper.
>
> The musical numbers, reflecting the limitation of the time and place, are generally loud, obvious, tasteless and lacking in impact or appeal . . .

He concludes that the staging, choreography, as well as the scenery and costumes, "are in keeping with the unpleasant quality of the subject matter. It all adds up," he writes, "to the impression that 'Cabaret' is hardly what most people would presumably pay to see."[25]

Little Murders, by Jules Feiffer, also illustrates Morrison's "age of ugliness":

> . . . sick, sick comedy . . . a luridly morbid comment on modern society . . . a sort of "The Homecoming" with jokes. . . .
>
> Compared to "Little Murders," the Harold Pinter work . . . is practically a Sunday school tract of sweetness and light. Not only in the use of non-fashionable gutter language, but in its characters, situations and its corrosive view of today's urban life the new show is likely to arouse lively comment. . . . the situation is the logical conclusion of the author's thesis about the senseless violence of modern humanity. The scene is an exaggeration, of course, and although it is a logical development of Feiffer's basic thesis, it is hardly calculated to keep an audience in a happy or emotionally fulfilled mood.[26]

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[25]Ibid.

[26]Bergen Record, November 21, 1966, p. 16.

Brecht's Three Penny Opera, too, represents the "age of ugliness."

> Since "Threepenny," based on John Gay's 18th Century work, "The Beggar's Opera" is dealing with an amoral society, the gutter language of the new version seems consistent with the depravity of this saga of crooks, bums, whores, pimps, rapists and murderers. At the same time, it's unlikely to cause much audience shock in a 1970's public accustomed to four-letter words on stage. . . .
>
> For those who relish the venality and squalor of Gay's London and Brecht's Communist view of late 1920's Berlin society, a new, ambitious "Threepenny" may be appealing in this age of ugliness.[27]

Edward Albee's Everything in the Garden, in Morrison's opinion, exemplifies the era because of the corrosive view of human nature that it contains. It argues that "every man has his price," even if it means condoning his wife's prostitution. Albee's housewife becomes a prostitute in order to keep herself occupied and help provide the family with various middle class luxuries. When her husband learns of her activities, he also discovers that the wives of all their country club group are similarly employed with their husbands' approval. Morrison found it:

> . . . morbid and spiritually sick to suggest that anything as inconsequential as a second car, a small greenhouse or imported rather than domestic vodka, would persuade normal people to pervert everything they most care about and believe in. It's not hard to feel sorry for anyone who sees life and people in such terms.[28]

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[27]Herald News, May 3, 1976, p. 20.

[28]Bergen Record, November 30, 1967, p. C-18.

Even when reviewing a play he does like, such as Crown Matrimonial, Morrison, mindful of the "age of ugliness," concludes:

> "Crown Matrimonial" is a fine play and a satisfying show. It probably won't please today's addicts of brutality and sordid language and it may be a trifle rarified for a mass public. But it is distinguished theatre and sets an admirable standard for Broadway.[29]

Perhaps no play illustrates the changing temper of the times as does the 1967 revival of Life with Father. Morrison was struck by the unique qualities of this holder of the record for longest running show on Broadway. He contrasts its positive values to much of contemporary theatre:

> It's easy to see why "Life with Father" holds the record as the longest run show in Broadway history. It's also evident from the excellent revival why the play isn't done very often anymore. It's a superb piece of work and it is well played in this first reproduction on Broadway, but it seems slightly out of place in the impatient, blatant, violent world of today.
>
> In some respects, "Life with Father" might also be called a miracle play. It is remarkable, that is, for having no profanity more extreme than a few vehement damns, no cruelty, no crude sex references, no hint of perversion and not a single deliberately obscure meaning. It is a brillantly craftsmanlike dramatization of a remarkable revealing picture of a forgotten era of American social history.
>
> Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse did a virtuoso job. Everything in the script fits into place, all the subtle plot threads of the early scenes are woven into a single texture, and each one pays off.

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[29]Herald News, October 3, 1973, p. 37.

> Every would-be playwright and aspiring actor should see "Life with Father." It was called an American comedy classic when it was first presented on Broadway, nearly 30 years ago, and it still offers a rare lesson in dramatic techniques. For a modern generation which neither knows nor cares about the past, however, the play may seem only quaint, and probably slow and a bit long.
>
> For those willing to take their time to savor a deft situation comedy with fully drawn characters who are warm and winning, with a situation taken from a colorful period of American history, "Life with Father" offers a memorable evening's entertainment. In short, feverish moderns may be merely perplexed and a trifle bored, but more patient playgoers are likely to have a treat.[30]

For productions that try to take "the generation gap" into consideration and specifically cater to the tastes of the age thirty and under audience, Morrison reacts negatively. With Grease, for example, he

> could only stand one act before fleeing to the comparatively fresh outdoors. "Grease" is obviously a generation-gap show. That is, it has a large and admiring public of young people, mostly in their 30's or younger, but many seem to share our dislike of its unpleasant characters, situations, lines and music, and are repelled by its excessively loud music. It's not for us old crows, who date from the French and Indian War.
>
> In "Grease" the price of nostalgia is characters that are nasty to one another and the social credo that, to be unpleasant is to be "in."[31]

Morrison firmly believes that our era has encouraged productions that cater to and exploit man's basest instincts.

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[30]Bergen Record, October 20, 1967, p. 79.

[31]Herald News, November 22, 1972, p. 18. Although Morrison was alienated by Grease, at the time of this writing, it is the longest-running musical on Broadway.

> It would be hard to exceed the ghoulishness, or perhaps just bad taste, of the producers who have announced plans for movies based on the Kennedy-Kopechne tragedy and the Charles Manson "family" murders. But then, show business always had its hucksters in morbid sensationalism, probably never as blatant as now, with its undisguised accent on pornography and mindless violence.[32]

Joseph Papp's selection of The Boom Boom Room for his first production at Lincoln Center was, according to Morrison, intended to create controversy. The play, he wrote, was "probably the most revolting drama in years,"[33] and seemed calculated "to leave any lingering Lincoln Center Repertory Company patrons in a state of shock."[34]

For Morrison, contemporary taste in humor also reflects "ugliness." "Humorists are a disappearing breed," he writes. "We live in an age of 'sick' jokes, wise cracking standup comics, the comedy of insult and the gag put-down."[35] In the past, humor was not characterized by "the mean, the sarcastic, the unkind, the bitter or the belittling note." Rather, it was more often "tolerant . . . convulsively funny . . . and occasionally quite touching."[36]

Morrison realizes that his attitude toward the theatre reflects part of a much greater social and aesthetic

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[32]Herald News, September 3, 1970, p. 26.

[33]Herald News, April 9, 1973, p. 16.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Herald News, November 9, 1970, p. 24.

[36]Ibid.

confrontation, i.e., that "there is a deep-lying struggle in the whole fabric of society, a boundless grinding collision of the New with the Old."[37] It is the clash suggested by Martin Gottfried's "Theatre Divided,"--conservative "rightists" and "revolutionary" leftists engaged in what Will Grant Jr. terms, "war."[38]

Grant believes the positions of the respective camps are clearly defined. The left wing critic, for example, "must be at war."[39] He, like the other members of the left wing, "demonstrates an overwhelming amount of hostility and invective toward, and rejection of, the American theatre and culture for which it stands: one nation of Philistines, under the god of Mammon, with plenty of kitsch for all."[40] According to Grant:

> He must be fighting his age, his theatre, its audience, its critics, and its culture. Second, in order to be at war with his age he must assume that he dislikes everything about the status quo. Hence, his war with the theatre is not only that theatre as theatre is bad, but also that it is bad because it is a mirror of the society of which it is a part. Third, to justify being at war, the critic's vision must be directed

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[37]Harold Rosenberg, ed. The Tradition of the New (Plainview, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, Inc., 1959), p. 1.

[38]Will Grant, Jr., "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism, 1945-1969: A Study of the Critical Bias and the Methodology of Selected American Theatrical Criticism," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1970, p. 11.

[39]Will Grant, Jr., "Varieties of American Theatrical Criticism," p. 32.

[40]Ibid.

> toward the future, and his writing must evidence an idealistic oratory with its accompanying concerns about what should be and what will be.
>
> By contrast, the right-wing critics oppose diametrically these three points. First, the right-wing critic is enthusiastic about the theatre. In contrast to his left wing counterpart, he is at peace. Second, in order to be enthusiastic he accepts, sometimes with love, sometimes with an understanding patience and good will, the status quo. Third, to justify this peaceful acceptance of the status quo, the right-wing critic defends the existing conditions. To do so, he adopts the posture of a perpetual optimist. He believes . . . that the curtains will always rise on a brighter tomorrow. Like his left-wing brethren, those on the right have their eyes turned toward the future, but the right wing critic assumes that the theatre, like the nation as a whole, will get better and better, that a change for the good will happen naturally as part of a democratic and American evolution. This idealism and its accompanying focus on the future is a feature of both the left- and right-wing viewpoints. Thus out of the ashes of divisiveness arises a phoenix of commonality.[41]

Morrison writes of this struggle:

> The current . . . furor over so-called dirty plays is, of course, another manifestation of the perennial controversy in all the arts between traditionalists and neologists, or avant garde. Such shrill arguments are common in the fields of literature, the fine arts, films and to, at least a mild degree, in the timid commercially oriented realm of television.[42]

Nevertheless, ever mindful of his position in the battle of the "traditionalists with the neologists," he

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[41]Ibid., p. 33.

[42]Bergen Record, September 5, 1964, p. 19.

warns, "At the same time, however, a healthy theatre should have critics who feel not only free, but also obligated to express their intellectual and emotional response to the plays with all the fervor and eloquence at their command. If violence is as Brook [Peter Brook] believes, the natural artistic language of the time, it's the duty of the dissenting critic to condemn it violently if he feels so impelled."[43]

Morrison labels the theatre produced by the "age of ugliness" as the "theatre of violence" or more strongly, the "theatre of evil."[44] He strikes out at Peter Brook's concept of violence as the natural artistic language:

> We apparently have another category of drama. Call it the theatre of violence, or perhaps more accurately the theatre of evil. It is distinct from the theatre of the absurd and the theatre of cruelty, though it probably derives from or at least relates to both. But for the purposes of discussion of the contemporary stage, the recent "The Homecoming" and "The Astrakhan Coat" are examples of an unusual type of play different from the theatre of the absurd and even from the theatre of cruelty. The theme of both works seems to be violence or more simply, evil. As such both are interesting, although as entertainment they are unsatisfying. . . .
>
> Neither "The Homecoming" nor "The Astrakhan Coat" is the first example of theatre of evil, even in a strictly modern sense. Last season's "Entertaining Mr. Sloane" was in a similar vein of malodorousness.
>
> . . . Significantly, all three plays came from England, which is having a boom of decadence, at least in stage dramatic authorship.[45]

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Bergen Record, January 28, 1967, p. 18.

[45]Ibid.

Two days after the above column appeared, Morrison wrote:

> The popularity of some raging dramas, such as Edward Albee's sensationally successful "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" indicates that the theme of violence has wide appeal. In support of that, certain of the authors involved have expressed the opinion that mindless violence and evil is a basic element of human nature. Pinter, for example, has said that the destructive characters in "The Homecoming" are not abnormal, but true to life.[46]

Morrison does not condemn playwrights' fascination with gratuitous violence because it is unrelated to social values. On the contrary, he has argued that art, at any given time, mirrors its social milieu. "In an era of violence and widespread negativism, the arts--and naturally the theatre--reflect the times."[47] Even more strongly, he said that although, "a great deal of today's plays present life in a very unattractive way and I don't like that, they are merely representing our time."[48]

Moreover, he is aware that the dramatic antecedents of the theatre of violence are as old as western theatre. In fact, he notes, "all dramatic categories are synthetic. The truism that ther's nothing new under the sun applies to the stage too, and we need go no further than the ancient Greek drama to find examples of the theatre of violence and

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[46]Bergen Record, January 30, 1967, p. B-23.

[47]Bergen Record, September 5, 1964, p. 19.

[48]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, November 14, 1974.

evil."[49] Since so much of Greek drama depicts man at the mercy of a heartless universe, he is consistent in his dislike of most of Greek drama.[50]

> "Agamemnon" is a basic item of classic Greek drama, which means that it's ponderous, bloodthirsty and inexorably senselessly cruel. In Greek mythology there was no charity, pity or margin for human frailty.

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[49]Bergen Record, January 28, 1967, p. 18.

[50]Not only does Morrison condemn the theatre of violence in the Greek tragedies, but even Shakespeare is not immune to his criticism. For example, he finds Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus to be "in the category of the appallingly cruel pre-Shakespeare period, when the theatre had to compete with bear-baiting and such cultural pursuits. The plot involves jealousy, treachery, the most revolting sort of brutality, but no indication of the humor, character insight and human dimension that were the essence of Shakespeare." (Bergen Record, August 10, 1967, p. D-8.) Such scenes as "the one in which a woman is blinded, her hands cut off, her tongue torn out and she is raped on her just murdered husband's bier" caused Morrison to find the play revoltingly brutal. (Herald News, September 23, 1974, p. 10.) When last performed in New York in 1967, by Joseph Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival in the Delacorte Theatre in Central Park, Morrison walked out after the first act, claiming, "one act of the play is all anyone should have to endure." (Bergen Record, May 10, 1967, p. D-8.)

Even modern performances of Shakespeare's plays suggest the influence of the theatre of violence in an age of ugliness. Duncan Williams, for example, in discussing "our contempt for the moralistic tampering of Shakespeare's plays in the eighteenth century," notes that, "Anyone who attended a recent performance of Shakespeare in London or Stratford-upon-Avon may on reflection realize that such productions are equally revealing of our age as were those of the 18th century. Today's representations emphasize, predictably, the violent and animalistic aspects in Shakespeare. In other words, all literature, including the productions of plays, appears to reflect the fashions and mores of its time, and there are more ways than one of distorting an author's original intention." (Duncan Williams, The Trousered Ape, pp. 32-33.

> And since it virtually has no relation to recognizable life, it's hard to take seriously or even take it at all.[51]

> I don't think Oedipus Rex is a good play. Sometimes I think that the ancient Greeks were mad in that their gods were a bunch of sadistic maniacs. People are terribly, terribly punished for no reason. Oedipus didn't know that he was sleeping with his mother and she didn't know that he was her son. That's idiotic. There is enough willful evil in the world without punishing man in a mindless fashion. Ancient Greek plays may be gripping as drama, but I find them philosophically negative, vicious and silly.[52]

Morrison recognizes the philosophical kinship of ancient Greek drama with the theatre of the absurd and his own philosophical inclinations are violated by both.

> In both the ancient Greek and modern plays of the theatre of the absurd, people suffer indiscriminately and I don't care for that. By nature I'm an optimist. I think that generally most people are nice if they're not frightened or threatened. I think that their basic impulses and instincts are good.

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[51]Herald News, May 19, 1977, p. C-6.

[52]It is Morrison's contention that the popularity of such plays as Agamemnon or Oedipus with modern audiences, more often than not, is based on snob appeal or intellectual posturing, rather than on any genuine emotional involvement with the characters or their fate. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, pointed out over one hundred years ago this kind of hypocrisy, in his own time, when he wrote, "it is certainly often only an affectation when so many profess to admire the Greek tragedies; for it is very evident that our age at least, has little sympathy for that which precisely constitutes Greek sorrow." (Bernard R. Dukore, ed. Dramatic Theory and Criticism; Greeks to Grotowski (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974), p. 554.

> I don't believe that most people are deliberately cruel. I get up in the morning knowing its going to be a busy day, but I look forward to it. Maybe my glands make me an optimist--I don't consciously choose to be.[53]

Although Morrison is not a Christian Scientist, he greatly admires what he considers is that faith's view of man. He believes it to be the opposite of the contemporary theatre's "violence" and its emphasis on the selfish, negative, and primitive qualities of man.

> The Christian Scientist believes in positive thinking. One goes on the assumption that things are good, that people are good, that things are going to turn out all right. It is more than talk, they act as if people are good. They are very tolerant. That is, for me, the marvelous quality of their religion. Most Christian Scientists are extremely civilized, very decent, nice, generous people who believe well of the world, well of each other, and well of everyone else.[54]

He condemns the emphasis on negativism in the arts, not only for the philosophy expressed, but because he firmly believes that the arts "not merely mirror reflecting social and cultural values, but are on the contrary, powerful forces which shape and mold the way people live and behave."[55] He singles out the movies and television, media which have large youthful audiences. "Does anyone doubt,"

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[53]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, November 18, 1974.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Duncan Williams as quoted by Hobe Morrison, Herald News, August 7, 1973, p. 8.

he asks, "that kids emulate their movie and television idols, in most cases, men whose achievements are by strength rather than by reason?"[56] With reference to the movie Death Wish, which was widely criticized for its glorification of murder and vigilantism, he wrote:

> I haven't read the novel nor seen the movie which several critics found shocking for its wanton brutality and mayhem. But if the picture is as the reviews claim, it must be potentially anti-social and destructive. The effect of any art or communication of ideas on human attitudes is obvious and unquestionable.
>
> Those who argue otherwise, as I assume the director and producers of the "Death Wish" movie do, must be deliberately self-deluding or possibly just moronic. If television didn't influence people, why should sponsors spend so many billions on it? No one can seriously claim that violence isn't contagious and self-perpetuating. The pen may be mighty, but the sword can do infinite damage.[57]

Although Morrison does not dispute the wide popularity of Death Wish and accepts the fact that "Many fans reportedly love it . . . and actually cheer the deliberate, lawless violence," he questions their emotional stability, asking, "Are they the same people who urged that tragically disturbed youth to jump to his death some years ago from a ledge outside a window of the Gotham Hotel?"[58]

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[56]Herald News, July 19, 1975, p. 20.

[57]Ibid.

[58]Herald News, August 31, 1974, p. 22.

He disagrees with Roger Vadim, a French film actor, writer, producer, and director whose film Charlotte was X-rated at least partly because of its emphasis on violence. Vadim states that such action:

> provides an outlet for aggressions that otherwise might boil up in an anti-social explosion. Part of the human mind is really sadistic and that is a part of us we try to hide. If, when you are a child, you have an opportunity to express it, it saves you from killing people later on.
>
> I think there's nothing better for children, than to watch violence on the screen while they are young--unless they are really vicious. Certain people would have become murderers anyhow.[59]

Morrison responds:

> That seems preposterous to me. How can anyone deny that all art, perhaps especially visual art and more particularly film, influences attitudes and behavior? Everyone is exposed to violence from infancy--from nursery rhymes to spankings--and the effect may even be salutary. But it seems to me that repeated exposure to violence must tend to lessen one's sensitivity to it.[60]

Duncan Williams agrees with Morrison.

> In the novels which he reads, in the plays and films which he sees, and in the philosophical and ethical treatises which are presented for his edification, Western man is continually subjected to a vision of himself as being violent, animalistic, alienated, mannerless and uncivilized, then is he not being encouraged to identify

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[59]Herald News, August 9, 1975, p. 20.

[60]Ibid.

> himself with such an image and mould his own outlook and behaviour to conform with such an image? Is there not a real danger that, like Prometheus, we will grow like what [we] contemplate and laugh and stare in loathesome sympathy? Man is, largely, what he conceives himself to be and the facts are incontrovertible.[61]

Morrison considers himself an optimist about the future of man; he deplores the theatre of the absurd and theatre of violence, which, to him, depict the human condition as a hopeless and meaningless one. For this reason, he occasionally refers to the theatre of the absurd as the "theatre of despair." He rejects this theatre not only for its absence of hope, but because it also embraces nihilism. To Morrison, Samuel Beckett is the chief spokesman for the theatre of despair, and he dislikes all of Beckett's plays.

> "Happy Days" and "Act Without Words," the initial two plays comprising a so-called "Samuel Beckett Festival" . . . are eloquently active expressions of the author's familiar creed of doom, defeatism and despair . . . Although Beckett never condescends to be explicit about the meaning of his dramas, they all convey the same basic message--"aw, what's the use?" . . .
>
> As theatrical entertainment it's a depressing bore.[62]

> In a recent interview in the New York Herald Tribune, staff writer John Gruen concluded, "Beckett was reluctant to speak of his impressions of New York, but he did venture the observation that people on the street, even the young house-

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[61]Duncan Williams, The Trousered Ape, p. 46.

[62]Herald News, November 21, 1972, p. 6.

> wives carrying home their groceries, had a look of despair. "It is entirely possible that the remaining 2 weeks of his stay here will not dispell the reality of this observation, for Beckett's own interior despair seems inevitable to color everything he looks upon."
>
> That "interior despair," which is the theme that emerges most clearly from "Waiting for Godot," Pinter's "The Caretaker," and Ionesco's "Rhinoceros," is, of course, an intensely personal attitude. But if it's justified and if, as these and other similar plays assert, man is just a beast and life itself a cruel hoax, such thinkers and saints as Jesus, Lincoln and Mahatma Ghandi were not men of ideals and faith, but only fools.
>
> But it's just possible that Beckett, as well as Pinter and Ionesco, and the other apostles of nihilism speak only for themselves.[63]

In Morrison's opinion, "the drama of despair is part of the self-pity school of drama"[64] that is actually hurting the theatre. He quotes Robert Corrigan who wrote: "despair is the only mortal enemy of art and the lifelessness of so much of our contemporary theatre is not due so much to our playwrights' concern with absurdity as to their unnecessary capitulation to it.

"We after all," writes Corrigan, "are absurd whether we know it or not, and the basic challenge of existence is to live in spite of it, not because of it. The same holds true for the theatre: what is crucial is not absurdity but what comes after it."[65]

Morrison writes:

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[63]Bergen Record, August 15, 1964, p. 20.

[64]Bergen Record, July 22, 1965, p. 49.

[65]Robert Corrigan as quoted by Hobe Morrison, Bergen Record, July 22, 1965, p. 49.

> The obvious factor in the shrinkage of productions over the last quarter century is, of course, that costs have skyrocketed during that period . . . because it is necessary to limit the size of the casts and physical production in order to keep the initial expense of the show within reason and to minimize the operating expenses. The situation may have deeper roots than economics, even as they may motivate authors. Perhaps the "small production plays" of recent years have been merely one expression of author psychology. Modern plays tend to be small in subject matter and theme . . . and are thus an expression of the small outlook and thinking of today.
>
> That is probably a manifestation of today's frightened, nihilistic, self-pitying attitude . . . As long as man lacks hope and spirit and belief in himself, his world is bound to be limited and his theatre is doomed to be small . . .[66]

What the theatre needs today, in order to prosper, Morrison concludes, are more plays that "accentuate the positive."[67] When Man of La Mancha opened, he predicted failure but after a successful four year run, Morrison attributed its popularity entirely to its positive spirit. "At a time when negation and defeatism is so widespread, the idealism of 'The Quest' and in fact, the show as a whole, provides a spiritual lift that the audience and the public as a whole obviously shares and relishes."[68]

He recognizes the difference of opinion as to what constitutes a "positive" or "negative" play. Kermit Bloomgarden,

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[66]Bergen Record, January 2, 1965, p. 17.

[67]Bergen Record, February 20, 1965, p. 19.

[68]Herald News, October 21, 1969, p. 20.

producer of such "affirmative plays" as The Diary of Anne Frank, Look Homeward Angel and The Music Man, referred to Death of a Salesman (which he also produced) as a "positive play, a drama of affirmation and hope."[69] Morrison thought this "a strange designation,"[70] although he believed it was a great play. Pressed further, Bloomgarden noted that in one of the final scenes, the older son expresses the thought that because his father's false standards had been exposed, he was able to face the truth.

> The producer . . . was immediately reminded that the title of the play indicates its basic theme and that the son's speech represents merely a minor thought by a secondary character.
>
> The main subject of "Death of a Salesman" is how a man's weakness destroys him. Bloomgarden's rebuttal was that by showing the fallacy of the hero's ideas, a basis for a healthy life has been made possible. It seemed a little like calling the San Francisco earthquake and fire a constructive happening because it led to the rebuilding of the city.[71]

He disagreed, too, with Hume Cronyn, the noted actor, who referred to William Hanley's Slow Dance on the Killing Ground as "a statement of affirmation on the grounds that it sweeps away prejudices and false assumptions, and thereby prepares the way for truth and knowledge."[72]

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[69]Bergen Record, February 20, 1965, p. 19.

[70]Ibid.

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

> The title of "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground" is from a line in the play, as is the description of life by one of the characters, a mixed-up, overly articulate Negro youth who turns out to have just murdered his prostitute mother. He carries a knife and an umbrella with a lethally sharpened end, wears a disguise, and at the final curtain goes out to give himself up to the police, as a practical way of committing suicide.
>
> The other two characters in the play are a German storekeeper who betrayed his Jewish wife and small son by collaborating with the Nazis, and is waiting for death as a retribution for his moral crime, and a college girl who is trying to arrange for an abortion because she doesn't want a child and doesn't like the youth with whom she had the sexual incident.
>
> "Slow Dance on the Killing Ground" at least to this observer is a lurid sordid negative and incidentally, over-written and overwrought drama that seems to express an attitude of violence and destruction. To regard it as positive or affirmative seems fantastic. Yet Cronyn is an intelligent, thoughtful man, so there's clearly a legitimate difference of opinion involved.[73]

Morrison sees "positive" plays as affirming life, holding the promise of a better tomorrow. A play such as Tennessee Williams' The Rose Tattoo is representative.

> The new Tennessee Williams play, "Rose Tattoo," is so unlike his "Glass Menagerie" and "Streetcar Named Desire," as to seem almost the work of a different author. Like its predecessors, it is a feminine character study of keen insight with passages of beauty and compassion. But whereas "Menagerie" and "Streetcar" were expressions of frustration and decadence, "Tattoo" is a positive story of turbulent action, pulsating with life . . .
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> As Williams himself has said, "Tattoo" was inspired by the vitality, warmth and unquenchable ebulliance of the Italian people

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[73]Ibid.

> as he came to know them during his long stay in Italy . . . Thus, the play is not only more robust than his previous works, but is a comedy in which laughter seasons violent emotion and in which the ending is on a rising note . . .
>
> The story located in a Sicilian community on the Gulf coast between New Orleans and Mobile, is about a hot-blooded young wife and mother passionately in love with her husband, who has a rose tattoo on his chest. When he is killed she withdraws from life where she works as a seamstress and keeps his ashes in a marble urn beside a figurine of the Madonna.
>
> When she finally learns that he actually betrayed her with another woman she smashes the urn, spurns the Holy statuette and, in a more or less symbolic gesture, has a love affair with a young truck driver who has reminded her of her husband and also has a rose tattoo. At the final curtain she has not only regained a healthy enough outlook to allow her teenage daughter to have a romance with a likable young sailor-suitor, but believes she has again seen the rose tattoo sign on her breast that indicates she has conceived another child.[74]

Another "positive" work is The Me Nobody Knows.

> "The Me Nobody Knows" is a musical based on the book of the same title, a collection of writings of New York ghetto children eleven to eighteen years old . . .
>
> The show presents the ugliness of big city slum life with the unself-consciousness of children's vision, but there is also innocence and a positive quality that suggests hope for the future. "The Me Nobody Knows" has moments of rare beauty, infectious humor and undeniable poignance.[75]

For Morrison the "left wing" theatre does not make "positive" statements, but he remains an optimist.

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[74]Variety, February 7, 1951, p. 58.

[75]Herald News, June 6, 1970, p. 18.

> It is easy to become discouraged, if not dismayed by this and only an incurable dreamer is likely to remain unconvinced about the sweeping rebellion and anarchy of which . . . some new works are expressions. There are redeeming aspects of the situation, however. Some of the old theatrical forms that have been wiped out are well lost, just as much of the old morality may have represented prudery and hypocrisy.
>
> But there's no occasion for panic. The worthwhile stage works--the creations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, O'Neill, Shaw, Wilde, Sherwood, and Gershwin--may wane a bit in popularity from time to time. They will survive, however, and continue to represent ageless standards. Such works have basic appeal, not only to the immediate senses and emotions, but also to the mind and spirit.
>
> . . . Speaking only of the theatrical phase of the cultural revolution, one thing appears certain. If the stage is to attract the general public, it will have to offer plays of affirmation instead of the expressions of negation and despair that are now driving audiences away. Humanity lives by hope, not by nihilism.[76]

Samuel Beckett represents the negative and nihilistic play for Morrison, but Sean O'Casey writes in the spirit of affirmation. O'Casey, to Morrison, "scorned the negativism of the so-called 'theatre of the absurd,' as expressed by Ionesco and other avant garde dramatists,"[77] and condemned "the theatre of murder, rape and cruelty that goes arm in arm with the 'theatre of the absurd.'"[78] A few months before his death, O'Casey attacked some of the nihilistic

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[76]Bergen Record, March 18, 1967, p. 18.

[77]Herald News, August 31, 1970, p. 10.

[78]Sean O'Casey, "The Bald Primaqueera," Atlantic Monthly IV (September 1965): 68.

plays. "The Bald Primaqueera," was a parody on the title of Ionesco's The Bald Prima Donna (produced in America as The Bald Soprano).

> There are still many red threads of courage, many golden threads of nobility woven into the tingling fibres of our common humanity. No one passes through life scatheless. The world has many sour noises, the body is an open target for many invisible enemies, all hurtful, some venomous, like the accursed virus which can bite deeply into flesh and mind.
>
> It is full of disappointment, and too many of us have to suffer the loss of a beloved child, a wound that aches bitterly until our time here ends. Yet even so, each of us, one time or another, can ride a white horse, can have rings on our fingers and bells on our toes, and if we keep our senses open to the scents, sounds and sights all around us, we shall have music wherever we go.[79]

Morrison comments:

> There is no denying the reputations of Ionesco and his fellow exponents of what seems to me the Theatre of Defeat, Degradation, and Despair. No less than the Nobel Prize has been awarded to Samuel Beckett for his whimpering "Waiting for Godot." But there's no comparison between such expressions of self-pity and the inspiring belief of O'Casey.
>
> As Atkinson sums up, "Over the 46 years of his literary career the quality of his writing was uneven. Although he wrote the most glorious English of his era--the English nearest in color and strength to the Elizabethan--the content did not always support the imagery.
>
> "But he was creative and imaginative and he was spiritually alive until the last moment. He had the moral courage of an idealist. Whatever his religious ideas may have been, I think God has reason to be proud of Sean O'Casey.[80]

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[79]Ibid.

[80]Herald News, August 31, 1970, p. 10.

Morrison abhors the need of the "left" to shock audiences. Such shock does not rest only on stage violence and cruelty, but includes frequent use of obscenity, nudity, and scenes of bizarre or explicit sex. Morrison often refers to plays exploiting such devices as the "theatre of shock."

> Besides being one of the more ludicrous plays in memory, "And Things That Go Bump in the Night" . . . has the dubious distinction of containing one flagrantly obscene bit of dialogue. That sort of attention-getting is common enough in today's theatre, and it set one first-nighter to wondering about the whole phenomenon of what might be called the theatre of shock.
>
> Most stage conscious people are familiar with the present manifestations of that perennial development, the avant garde theatre, as it has emerged at various times over the centuries. In its current forms, it's known as the Theatre of the Absurd and the Theatre of Cruelty. Other categories of the same general trend might be termed the theatre of Obscurity and the Theatre of Shock.
> It is the latter that was brought to mind by the gutter language in "And Things That Go Bump in the Night." As with practically all such uses of calculated vulgarity, the evident intention was to smack the audience across the face, to get attention for an emotional effect. It's an ancient device, of course, containing elements of the same sort of rebelliousness that inspires small boys to write dirty words and pictures on walls and floors.[81]

Morrison claims that the excesses of the theatre of shock, "in a fairly obscene way," offer "a substitute for talent, since an inept writer has no recourse except to resort to blatently outrageous tactics to gain attention. Better to draw disapproval, or even reprisal," states

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[81]Bergen Record, May 8, 1965, p. 19.

Morrison, "than be ignored, it might be reasoned. As a general thing, therefore, the Theatre of Shock is a fancy name for the theatre of no talent."[82]

Although Morrison realizes that he should not be shocked or outraged at the rebellion because the playwright wants to shock and outrage, he is not always successful in his attempt at retaining balance and his sense of humor. For example, he found the 1972 musical version of Aristophanes' Lysistrata, "relentlessly tasteless and unfunny, . . . It could justifiably appropriate the title of last season's off-Broadway spoof, 'The dirtiest Show in Town.'"[83] At the same time, instead of being really shocked by the profanity, nudity, and sex in many contemporary plays, Morrison more often finds such features less shocking than boring. He does not dislike a production merely because it contains profanity or nudity. He liked The Boys in the Band even though it "was replete with dialogue that would have been inconceivable in public, let alone the theatre, as recently as 10 years ago."[84] He approved of the profanity because, "it was appropriate to the situation and characters, however, and few people objected to it. The Mark Crowley play was deservedly an outstanding success critically and financially."[85] He objects to the gratuituous, sensational-

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[82]Bergen Record, March 3, 1965, p. 19.

[83]Herald News, November 4, 1972, p. 18.

[84]Herald News, December 9, 1970, p. 50.

[85]Ibid.

ist use of vulgarity that has no dramatic function other than to shock an audience.[86]

Morrison recognizes that "some of the modern frankness and freedom is healthy, just as the old prudery was morbid,"[87] and that indeed, "some of the old theatrical forms that have been wiped out are well lost."[88] What Morrison opposes are the excesses of the rebellion.

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[86]Although Morrison seems to be willing to accept the use of profanity on stage, if it is "appropriate to the situation and the characters," he is hardly consistent in this attitude. In a column entitled, "Is Filthy Language Necessary?" written as late as February, 1977, he noted that "Several of the reviews of 'American Buffalo' mentioned its filthy dialogue, and a few people commented how the language of the three men in David Mamet's play was appropriate to their characters."

"Granted," he writes, "that many gutter creatures do talk that way, it still shouldn't be necessary for a talented, resourceful author to use it accurately on the stage. An expert writer," according to Morrison, "should be able to convey the impression of such language without actually using it." Morrison does not detail how this can be done, although he does point out that "it's a natural assumption that good dialogue is natural talk. On the contrary," he observes, "the chances are that, if it's good, it isn't natural at all, but is highly contrived. Very few people," he continues, "normally speak the way stage characters do. Or to put it the other way, practically no effective stage characters speak the way real people do.

"Most of us talk in long, rambling ungrammatical sentences--or what we probably assume are sentences. If stage dialogue were as disorganized, meandering and loquacious as ordinary conversation, people would walk out of the theatre in hordes--or the respective plays probably wouldn't even be produced."

He concludes, "Dialogue is frequently the thing mentioned in poor plays. Dialogue that sounds authentic and holds audience attention is apt to be utterly unlike real conversation. What it usually does have are canny arrangement, brevity, purpose, and a semblance of action. It's almost always appropriate for the character using it." (Herald News, February 28, 1977, p. B-4). Nevertheless, it is uncertain how an expert writer should convey the impression of profanity "without using it," especially "if the profanity is appropriate to the character."

[87]Herald News, March 20, 1969, p. 29.

[88]Bergen Record, March 18, 1967, p. 18.

> Although the revolt against Victorian prudery has been healthy for the arts, the new freedom and frankness have been carried to excess. An example is "Two by Two," the musical about Noah and the ark which recently opened . . .
>
> At one point in the show, the common word for excrement is used. The word itself is common enough in today's theatre and has become a cliche in the movies. But its use in this instance is disconcerting and unpleasant because it is uncalled for and contributes nothing to the show.[89]

"Excessive frankness," to Morrison, reflects "the present age of permissiveness,"[90] but he believes that public opinion is being manipulated by "left wing" sentiment.

> One off-Broadway show, "Geese," consists of a pair of one act plays in which first two nude male actors have a love scene then two nude actresses have a similar scene. The New Yorker magazine and the Daily News have not reviewed the production, but several newspapers published favorable notices, and there has been little or no public disapproval . . .
>
> As for the ugliness that has become so fashionable in the arts, it appears to be growing in extent and degree. In most cases, it is presented in the guise of so-called truth and progress.[91]

Morrison is convinced that the present acceptance and popularity of permissive moral standards is merely a passing fad, part of a great cycle in the history of the theatre that will eventually pass. He worries that excess

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[89]Herald News, December 9, 1970, p. 50.

[90]Herald News, March 20, 1969, p. 29.

[91]Ibid.

can bring repression.

> Extremes of nudity, frank sexualism, profanity, violence, ugliness and general permissiveness we are seeing today will bring extremes of reaction. Probably the reaction will not go as far as in the Victorian era, although there is no certainty of that. But there will unquestionably be a revulsion from the deliberate vulgarity, filth and nihilism of the most radical avant-garde elements.[92]

The reaction that Morrison fears most, and at times seems to be prophesying, is outright government censorship, the harbingers of which he has already noticed:

> As many non-prudes have feared, the performing arts are apparently going to have to endure the inevitable backlash from the epidemic of extreme nudity and ultra-sex of movies, stage and printed material. Several states, including California in particular, have adopted or are preparing to adopt, stringent laws to deal with the situation.
>
> No matter how it's sliced, that means censorship, which few thoughtful people want. It's bound to come, however, when artistic liberties are abused. As with all laws, it means that the reasonable majority must be penalized because of the excesses of an unscrupulous minority.[93]

* * *

Another distinguishing feature of the theatre of the "left" that Morrison dislikes is what he terms "obscurantism"[94] When he learned that Samuel Beckett declared "I'm not con-

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[92]Herald News, March 20, 1969, p. 29.

[93]Herald News, November 6, 1969, p. 46.

[94]Bergen Record, August 15, 1967, p. 19.

cerned with intelligibility," he responded, "That's analogous to a banker being uninterested in money or a doctor aloof to matters of health. The statement is consistent with this column's low opinion of Beckett as a dramatist."[95]

Samuel Beckett is not the only playwright of the "theatre of the obscure" to incur Morrison's wrath. He finds Harold Pinter deliberately obscure and esoteric:

> Pinter, widely regarded as the golden boy of contemporary English drama, is of the Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet school of garrulous unintelligibility, obscure symbolism, non-sequitor humor and grubby, if not sordid subject matter.[96]

Morrison describes himself as a "mere outsider,"[97] and

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[95]Herald News, January 12, 1973, p. 22.

[96]Bergen Record, October 5, 1961, p. 49. If Morrison finds a play obscure he will usually label it "dull" or "boring." Nevertheless, he is not dogmatic about this and admits "there are constant exceptions." (Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.) For example, he has said:

> I don't remember who it was that I was talking to the other day, but I was in the odd position of having to defend "Jumpers."
>
> This person complained he didn't understand it and therefore disliked it. I replied I also wasn't sure what it was about, but I did enjoy it and had a good time.
>
> I believe I know, in a very vague, general way what the play had to say. But exactly what the meanings are in every part of the play I haven't the faintest idea. Yet here I was, I who always insisted upon intelligibility, defending a play that was unintelligible with someone who was taking my position. I guess that proves I'm not consistent. (Ibid.)

[97]Bergen Record, October 6, 1967, p. C-19.

"heretical playgoer,"[98] realizing that his opinions of such men as Beckett and Pinter place him outside the critical mainstream.

In a similar manner he criticizes the plays of Edward Albee. He writes of Tiny Alice:

> . . . an interminable talkfest of unintelligibility, if not meaningless. The author has never allowed himself to be goaded into revealing what he's trying to say in this apparent allegory but has merely dismissed the matter by saying the play means what the individual thinks it means.
>
> Well, it at least seems to be about the betrayal of idealism and the corruption of religion. It's also evidently concerned with sex, though there's nothing to suggest that it refers to the normal kind. Whatever the meaning or message or theme, it offers not a single provocative or penetrating or even coherent idea in the approximately three hours of grand eloquent harrangue.[99]

Morrison finds Albee's plays, and Beckett's and Pinter's, not only unintelligible and dull, but intellectually pretentious. He believes most "meanings" are read into the works of these men; the plays are not "symbolic and profound as all get out."[100] He even suggests that "perhaps the intention of these plays is to be utterly incomprehensible."[101]

He believes that the "left wing" critical establishment is foisting a hoax on a gullible public looking for

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[98]Ibid.

[99]Herald News, March 27, 1973, p. 6.

[100]Ibid.

[101]Herald News, February 17, 1975, p. 17.

authentic insights into the problems of life, but because of the intellectual snob appeal[102] of these plays, the public is afraid to admit that it does not understand and is frankly bored by the plays. He sees it as his duty as a critic to report what he sees, "taking note of and mentioning what might offend the sensitive or anger the avant-gardests, and let the readers patronize what they please--and express their own reactions to it."[103]

Morrison does not believe the "theatre of the obscure" can endure because it deals in "theatrical abstractions, and words are only suggestions of what may be the author's meaning."[104] Such "theatrical abstractions" of the theatre of the obscure are part of another movement that opposes the use of articulate verbal expression in the theatre. "The whole extemporization movement is a rebellion against the theatre of dialogue."[105] He sees Julian Beck and Judith Molina and their Living Theatre as exponents of non-verbal

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[102]A classic example of this "intellectual snob appeal" at work is the Broadway run of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. According to Morrison, "the allegorical curio" might last its advertised limited four week engagement because of "the provocative what's-it-all-about critical notices and controversial word-of-mouth, plus intellectual snob-appeal," but he warns, "even with artificial stimuli, it's not a dish for general popularity." (Variety, April 25, 1956, p. 72.) He later wrote, "Samuel Beckett's Nobel prize drama is my idea of a dull toothache." (Herald News, January 26, 1971, p. 18.)

[103]Herald News, March 20, 1969, p. 29.

[104]Bergen Record, September 17, 1965, p. 60.

[105]Herald News, February 23, 1970, p. 11.

theatre and resents the fact that Clive Barnes, then drama critic for the New York Times expressed his approval of the Living Theatre, "a curious attitude for a man whose medium is words."[106]

To Morrison, the rebellion against words is an expression of anti-intellectualism.

> One of the basic things that distinguishes man from the lower animals is words--and properly printed words, since certain animals seem to have a sort of language, in some cases expressed in sounds, by which they communicate . . . While emotions and general ideas may be communicated by action, movement, music, rhythm and other means, the only way of conveying precise information and ideas is through words. It is by words that man has accumulated knowledge and developed the power of intellect. It is through great language that great ideas are expressed.
>
> The great creators of theatre have been men of words--that is, dramatists. From Aeschylus, Platus, Shakespeare, Shaw, Moliere, Pirandello, Chekhov, Ibsen, O'Neill--the immortals who have conceived timeless drama--have been artists in the use of language. Sir Arthur Sullivan, Victor Herbert and Richard Rodgers have added dimension to theatre art, but the basis has been words.
>
> The outstanding actors, directors and designers have interpreted the language eloquently, but the language is the beginning and the essence of drama.[107]

Although he is convinced of the ephemeral nature of today's "left wing" revolt, he does not underestimate the quality of the opposition.

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[106]Ibid.

[107]Herald News, February 23, 1970, p. 11.

> It is well to remember that today's artistic rebels are not frivolous and unconcerned. On the contrary, perhaps no generation in all history has been so intense and zealous in its challenge to the world's problems. It will in time, inevitably find its own set of values and standards.
>
> Those values and standards, when they come, will not be what the previous generations have known and lived by. That is also inevitable and just as well. One thing is certain; whatever the theatre of the approaching era may bring, it won't be a return of the sort of predictable, deliberate, house-broken plays that audiences have ceased to find provocative. Perhaps audiences are ready . . . for a swing of the pendulum away from plays of obscurity, self-pity, and vulgarity, and toward poetic form, aspiration, and maybe even romance.[108]

He himself admits a fondness for the well-made play and concedes his tastes in plays can be described as "old fashioned";[109] nevertheless, he does not accept this as a perjorative description. "One of the most lethal adjectives that a critic can use is to call a work 'old fashioned' . . . It seems an almost meaningless term, but" . . . "it may have destructive impact. What the critic presumably means," especially if he is partial to the avant garde, "is that the piece he is reviewing is dated or antiquated."[110]

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[108]Bergen Record, May 22, 1965, p. 19.

[109]Herald News, January 30, 1975, p. 40.

[110]Ibid.

CHAPTER VII:

HIS DEFENSE OF BROADWAY

Morrison believes that theatre should be varied enough to encompass many different tastes and many different types. "One of the strengths of the theatre as a whole is its ability to include all theories and methods. In fact, the more different kinds of theatre there are, the healthier the stage seems to be."[1]

He disagrees with those who see the theatre only as an authentic mirror of experience.

> Why can't the super-serious theatre lovers accept the idea that a healthy theatre means all kinds of shows as well as all types of audiences? Sometimes the intense drama addicts seem as narrow as the sort of empty-heads who can't stand anything more substantial than "Hellzapoppin."[2]

Respect for diversity, however, is only part of Morrison's prescription for a healthy theatre:

> Diversity is not enough if the plays that are done are of an inferior quality. What the theatre obviously needs--always has and always will . . . are more good shows of all kinds. A healthy theatre should have all sorts of shows, provided they're good.[3]

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[1]Herald News, February 30, 1970, p. 11.

[2]Bergen Record, October 13, 1965, p. 19.

[3]Bergen Record, February 15, 1964, p. 15.

The kind of theatre that best represents Morrison's own attitudes towards the stage is Broadway, which "is internationally synonymous with the highest standards of theatre."[4]

In a column entitled "Criticism of Broadway Has No Leg to Stand On," Morrison sums up his feelings about Broadway:

> Broadway does have manifestations of greed, vulgarity, and the other cited sins, including dishonesty, of course, as witness several recent mindless, tasteless shows . . . as well as such perennial malfactions as ticket scalping. But those things are not the Broadway that is world famous. The Broadway that matters, the real Broadway is the music of Richard Rodgers and the plays of Tennessee Williams, the scenery of Jo Mielziner and the costumes of Motley, the direction of Jerome Robbins and yes, at least one of the plays of Albee himself.[5]

Morrison disagrees with Robert Brustein's categorizing theatre as either seminal or consumer oriented, with seminal theatre developing "new playwrights, new techniques and approaches," and consumer theatre "content to satisfy its immediate audiences, who absorb the theatrical product in the same spirit as they would digest a good meal."[6]

Morrison retorted:

> Implicit in the piece was the assumption that the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Yale Drama

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[4]Bergen Record, January 28, 1965, p. 45.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Herald News, September 7, 1974, p. 22.

> School, both of which Brustein heads, represent what he regards as seminal theatre, and that Broadway is the prime example of so-called consumer theatre. Also implicit was that which he defines as seminal theatre was creative, artistic and vital, while the supposed consumer theatre is imitative, dramatically corrupt and moribund . . . There have been more new playwrights and new techniques developed on and by Broadway than by all the drama schools in the country . . . it is the essence of professionalism to seek to interest, hold and satisfy an audience, in contrast to the sort of dilettantism that is concerned primarily with personal gratification.[7]

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[7]Ibid. For Morrison, Edward Albee personifies the attitude of the artist that blames "audiences for the sorry state of the theatre." Morrison writes, "As for the playwright's [Albee's] resentment of audiences, that's merely an example of confused values. It's his function as an artist to reach and hold his audience. The audience," in Morrison's opinion, "has no obligation to appreciate him, or even pay attention to him. When the playwright begins to think he's too good for the audience," he concludes, "he's become too big for his britches." (Bergen Record, December 2, 1967, p. 18.)

This notion is critical to understanding Morrison's idea of the relationship that exists between the artist and his audience. "The success of an artistic work is generally assumed to involve two-way communication between the artist and the audience. As any performer can testify, the response of an audience is an inspiration. Conversely, lack of response tends to be demoralizing.

It may be argued that an audience has the obligation to give a performance fair hearing. It may also be asserted that the artist has the obligation to do his utmost to reach the audience and if not satisfy it, at least to get a response.

If there is no such response, or if the reaction is not the intended one, who has failed, the artist or the audience? When a play, a song, a symphony, a novel or a painting does not capture the interest and stir the emotion or imagination of the audience, who is to blame?

The primary obligation, it seems to me, is the artist's. The audience should give a new work sympathetic attention, but is under no obligation to approve or to be emotionally or intellectually stirred. Boredom is a comment on a dull work." (Herald News, February 17, 1975, p. 10).

Morrison defends Broadway's star system,[8] the subject of widespread attack:

> A few theatrical purists preach the anti-star gospel, apparently on the theory that stars lower the quality of ensemble playing. Repertory theatres having permanent companies usually don't have stars. The reason is not that stars weaken ensemble performance, but that repertory operation is uneconomical, so most such groups cannot afford stars.[9]

In Morrison's view, critics of the star system must acknowledge that stars stimulate theatrical interest and vitalize the theatre.[10] He believes they are an integral, exciting, and valuable theatrical element, and are here to stay.[11]

The presence of a top star can be so important to a production that management will sometimes pay to break a contract with a star, in order to get a better known star who might attract new audiences. Richard Burton, for example, was asked to replace Anthony Perkins (who was already working under contract).

> Why should the management want Burton instead of Perkins? There might be little to choose between them in the matter of performance, particularly at this point in the play's

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[8]"The deliberate use of stars," writes Morrison, "is really not a system, but is sometimes a consistent management policy." (Herald News, July 17, 1976, p. 37.)

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Herald News, April 1, 1971, p. 20.

> extended run. The reason is simply that Burton is regarded as a stronger box office personality than Perkins. After running 62 weeks, "Equus" is no longer a powerhouse attraction and Burton would presumably increase its popular appeal.[12]

Morrison points out that not all stars are actors. There are box office names among playwrights, producers, and directors, and they, too, have the power to turn a poor production into a box office success. "Neil Simon's name sells tickets, as do the names of Richard Rodgers, Michael Bennett, Bob Fosse, Arthur Miller, Tom Stoppard, Stephen Sondheim, Alan Jay Lerner and Leonard Bernstein . . ."[13]

Aside from the "star system" Broadway has often been criticized for "falsifying reality with the cunning disguise of realism."[14] Morrison sees the Broadway theatre not as a temple of realism but as "a world of illusion," where, "nothing is apt to be at its best, in fact, when things are least what what they seem. That's when illusion seems most real, and when the stage is fulfilling its function."[15]

Morrison is far more concerned that a work be "good theater" than it be realistic, and for him "good theatre" is one that entertains or moves the audience emotionally.

Another common accusation against Broadway, according

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[12]Herald News, September 26, 1975, p. 18.

[13]Herald News, June 17, 1976, p. 37.

[14]Joseph Golden, The Death of Tinkerbell, p. 15.

[15]Bergen Record, June 28, 1966, p. 55.

to Morrison, is that it is imitative and addicted only to entertainment, shunning anything that might prove serious, provocative, daring, or unconventional. Morrison believes this is absurd.

> Practically every important innovation in the American theatre, if not the whole western world theatre, during the last half-century has been on Broadway. The trail-blazing musical comedy techniques of Rodgers and Hammerstein, as started with "Oklahoma," were all tried first on Broadway. The strikingly unorthodox works of Thornton Wilder, "The Skin of Our Teeth" and "Our Town," were first done on Broadway.
>
> The novel stage presentations of Tennessee Williams in "Camino Real" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" were introduced on Broadway, as was the important use of ballet in such shows as "On Your Toes" and "West Side Story." The eloquent employment of skeletal scenery by Mielziner in "Summer and Smoke" and "Death of a Salesman," was a Broadway innovation.[16]

Besides innovation and daring, Morrison indicates that Broadway, contrary to the opinion of its critics, contains the diversity essential for healthy theatre. The 1963-64 season is representative of Broadway fare:

> 23 shows on Broadway (excluding "Fair Game for Lovers" which seemed unlikely to continue . . .) included 5 comedies, 2 comedy-dramas (comedies with a basically serious theme), 6 dramas, 7 musical comedies, a revue, and 2 foreign imports (one a repertory group from Israel and the other an Italian musical).
>
> Disregarding the inconsequential quick flops (there were 14, in about the same ratio of types as the continuing shows),

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[16]Bergen Record, January 28, 1965, p. 45.

> there have been 27 new productions on Broadway so far this season. They have included 7 comedies, 4 comedy-dramas, 9 dramas, 6 musicals, a folk review, and 3 foreign language shows. That seems fairly representative.[17]

Morrison does admit that in any given season a disproportionate number of productions consist of musicals and light comedies and that fact has become "practically a theme song for earnest devotees of the drama."[18] Yet, "What's So Bad About Feeling Good?"[19] "Most people, if we're a judge, prefer musical shows to straight plays, and comedy has always been more popular than drama."[20] This fact has "always been true, back to the time of ancient Rome, where audiences walked out on plays to rush to gladiatorial contests. Before that, it was true in Greece."[21]

In response to the paucity of serious drama on Broadway, Morrison observes:

> When it comes to the theatre, the public is notoriously stubborn. It simply will follow its own frivolous preferences rather than obey the stern recommendations of earnest-minded pundits (make that read critics). For proof, just consult the list of longest-run Broadway shows--of the 25 leaders, 13 were musicals, 11 comedies, and one a melodrama, but hardly a serious play

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[17]Bergen Record, February 5, 1964, p. 15. The 1976-77 season was equally representative.

[18]Bergen Record, February 15, 1964, p. 15.

[19]Herald News, May 20, 1970, p. 52.

[20]Bergen Record, February 4, 1967, p. 19.

[21]Bergen Record, December 25, 1964, p. 22.

> ("Angel Street"). . . . Theatregoers are apt to be discriminating about serious plays (and probably they always were), but the success of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" "Luther," and "A Man For All Seasons," to cite a few that come readily to mind from recent seasons, indicates that there is an audience for serious plays--provided they're good. Practically nobody cares a hoot for a mediocre serious play.[22]

Morrison thinks that comedy might well be the best dramatic form for dealing with serious subjects even though, "too many theatrical pundits disdain comedy as a serious form of drama. For those without humor, wit seems merely frivolous and earnestness is apt to be equated with importance," but he observes, "a chap named George Bernard Shaw . . . did fairly well at making mockery of weighty matters in his time," and "an ancient named Aristophanes tickled the ribs and provoked the thoughts of Athenian audiences a matter of 2,5000 years ago."[23]

To Morrison, playwright Neil Simon best represents serious comedy in our time.

> All of the author's hits--and all of his plays have been hits--have been increasingly serious, provocative and revealing.
>
> "Come Blow Your Horn," "Barefoot in the Park," "The Odd Couple," "Star Spangled Girl," "Plaza Suite," and "Last of the Red Hot Lovers" have had something serious beneath the surface laughter. As

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[22]Bergen Record, December 25, 1964, p. 22.

[23]Herald News, August 28, 1970, p. 17.

> it happens, Simon is also a super technician who writes believable characters, in manifestly authentic situations.[24]

Simon consistently displays a sense of humor, and humor, for Morrison, is essential to all good plays.[25]

> Nowhere is a sense of humor so essential as in the arts. It adds flavor and dimension to everything. Without it, even the best work, including serious efforts, lack perspective.[26]

Morrison resents charges often made that playwrights "if they are to play the game of the entertainment market . . . must accept its subtle rules like everyone else and

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[24]Herald News, May 11, 1970, p. 11.

[25]Morrison does not view comedy as necessarily the same thing as humor (Bergen Record, June 25, 1966, p. 16.)in that a work may be comic but completely lacking in humor. Whereas comedy is often dependent on topical laugh lines, humor (which can be comical) is more a "state of mind, a mood or a disposition. (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, s.v.) He wrote, regarding the Abe Einhorn farce, Agatha Sue, I Love You, that "One of the baffling aspects of the theatre is the subtle but unmistakable difference between what's funny and what isn't. Some jokes make an audience laugh and others have merely an uncomfortable silence." (Bergen Record, December 15, 1966, p. 17.) He found the farce to be an essentially unfunny concoction that leaves the slightly embarrassing impression that the author has seen too many Broadway farces, especially George Abbott productions . . . The point is," he writes, "that although Agatha Sue has a diverting farce premise and quite a few laughable lines, it is essentially unfunny--in fact," he concludes, "it's really without humor." Humor, in Morrison's opinion, is an attitude that allows for enduring comedy. It is much more than a series of laugh lines.

[26]Bergen Record, September 3, 1966, p. 18.

consult the market first and their own taste and intelligence second."[27] He quotes John Arden:

> I don't suppose I could write a commercial play if I tried. I don't know what audiences really like. I just write what I would like to see myself--and I don't suppose that I represent a cross-section of the audience.[28]

Morrison is repelled by the concept that Arden and his colleagues believe that they have more integrity than the author of commercial successes. The assumption that a successful playwright is crassly motivated and writes only to please audiences is presumption.

> Was Shaw, whose plays were comic and enormously successful, less sincerely and deeply motivated than some of his solemn, self-conscious, less successful contemporaries? Were George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart? Neil Simon? Is there, in fact, necessarily any relationship at all between an artist's sincerity or conviction and the quality of his work?
>
> The assumption of unsuccessful writers that they could be successful if only they could stoop to conform to some popular standard is not only nonsense, but usually just an excuse for lack of talent and discipline. If Arden, or any other playwright, or indeed any artist of any kind, wants to have commercial success of any sort, he had better try to satisfy his own standards and not worry about what audiences are supposed to want.
>
> The only thing is, commercial success requires much more than merely satisfying the individual's own standards--it requires talent, technique, and the sort of grinding, exhausting work that esoteric

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[27]Francis Fergusson, "Broadway," The American Theater: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 106.

[28]Bergen Record, July 31, 1965, p. 19.

> artists lack the strength and will to exert. The artist may even discover to his amazement--and benefit--that an audience's standards can be as severe as his own.[29]

Another distinctive quality of Broadway, for Morrison, is its strict adherence to tough professional standards. He takes pride in the fact that the Broadway theatre is "ruthless" in its pursuit of professionalism.

> Broadway is ruthless when it requires the absolute best, regardless of who or what is involved. To a Broadway audience, and therefore to the producers, directors, authors and actors who constitute Broadway, it makes not the slightest difference whether an artist is white or black, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, native or foreign born.
>
> Can he write a successful play or compose a melodic song, direct an effective performance, or act a part believably? If he can, he will be in demand, and can pretty much name his terms. If he can't, his skin color, religion, social position, or social standing don't matter. In that case, he's not needed, and bargain prices mean nothing.
>
> Many of the other disparaging things said of Broadway may be true, and may be unfortunate. But its ruthlessness is an asset, not a liability or a fault.[30]

In Morrison's opinion, Edward Albee is a good example of someone who "makes something of a career decrying what he regards as the low standards of Broadway"[31] while at the same time presenting all his plays there since his success with Virginia Woolf.

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[29]Ibid.

[30]Bergen Record, April 3, 1968, p. 18.

[31]Bergen Record, January 28, 1965, p. 45.

Morrison quotes Albee as referring "slightingly to the works of other contemporary writers, but, in the 10 names he lists as first rate or potentially first rate, only one has had a Broadway success." Morrison questions the omission of dramatists like Simon, Burrows, Mrs. Kerr, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and the authors of such musicals as Fiddler on the Roof and Man of La Mancha.

> Albee, as always, expresses scorn for Broadway, which he clearly regards as shallow and venal. As usual, also, he expresses admiration for what he implies are the artistically higher and more creative conditions of off-Broadway and the regional theatre.
>
> It's a strange attitude, at least for an author with his record.[32]
>
> Until the Broadway production of "Virginia Woolf," all of Albee's plays were done off-Broadway. With the success of "Virginia Woolf," however, Albee was in a position to make his own terms as to production, since he was by then in partnership with the management that had done his early works.
>
> Since, given the choice of whether to play Broadway or not, Albee has had every play since "Virginia Woolf" produced on Broadway, not off-Broadway.[33]

Morrison believes a different set of standards applies to theatres away from Broadway. He expects less from regional, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway theatres in the way of writing, acting, directing and technical finess. He sees such theatres as amateurish, for the most part, and judges them accordingly. He recognizes their potential as

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[32]Ibid.

[33]Herald News, January 30, 1970, p. 5.

training centers for the professional theatre--but not much more.

This attitude is reflected in many of his reviews:

> The delayed reaction to Julie Bovasso's "Gloria and Esperanza," the La Mama Experimental Theatre Club production presented at the ANTA Theatre . . . is that it merely confirms a previous conviction that off-Broadway (or in this case off-off Broadway) is not in the same league with Broadway. That applies not merely to the level of acting, directing and production, but most of the time to the quality of writing.
>
> For novelty of subject matter, writing, direction and production, and as a training and testing ground for talent, off-Broadway has a useful function, though it no longer offers the advantage of bargain ticket prices. With rare exceptions, however, off-Broadway standards are woefully below those of Broadway, even if Broadway has presented comparatively little of real distinction in the last few seasons.
>
> "Gloria Esperanza" would never have been produced on Broadway . . .[34]

A similar attitude may be seen in his review of Watercolor and Criss-Crossing, one-act playlets by Philip Magdalany.

> The show is one of a series of regional, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway offerings sponsored by the American National Theatre and Academy . . .
>
> As exercises by an inexperienced dramatist practicing his craft, "Watercolor" and "Criss-Crossing" are not without interest. As an evening of theatre for audiences paying even reduced prices, they are inadequate. Magdalany has contrived small-dimension atmosphere or mood sketches, evidently working toward satiric comment on American life.

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[34]Herald News, February 13, 1972, p. 20.

> Both pieces seem derivative and neither is fully developed nor cogently expressed . . .
> For anyone sufficiently curious about the direction new playwriting may be going--or at least where efforts are being made to take it--and who may wonder how much embarrassing dialogue actors may be willing to speak in public, "Watercolor" and "Criss-Crossing" perhaps offer a rewarding evening. Entertainment-seekers would do well to try elsewhere.[35]

It is mainly because of the "lower standards" of the non-Broadway theatre that Morrison rarely "strays from his accustomed Broadway rounds" in order to encounter new shows, in what he terms "the basement-and-belfry circuit."[36]

More recently, Morrison has somewhat altered his boycott of the off-Broadway stage because Broadway, too, has played host to strange choices of plays.

> In general Broadway used to represent a standard of professional maturity and artistry. Much of off-Broadway, on the other hand, was apt to reflect unfettered imagination and disarming enthusiasm rather than theatrical excellence. The situation has evidently changed in that regard, however. Perhaps the general level of off-Broadway hasn't improved so much, but the standard of Broadway has in some cases, deteriorated. In recent weeks off-Broadway has produced an excellent revival of Arthur Miller's fine drama, "All My Sons," and a worthy edition of S. J. Perelman's flawed but interesting "The Beauty Part."
> Broadway, in contrast, has stooped to the flagrantly degraded study of perverted eroticism in "Flowers," the clumsy, tasteless treatment of a tragic situation in Anne Burr's "Myrt and Phil" and the artistic

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[35]Herald News, January 22, 1970, p. 18.

[36]Herald News, September 15, 1969, p. 26.

> sludge of the homosexual graffiti "Tubstrip." Under such circumstances, Broadway has hardly been an attraction . . .
>
> Hereafter, it'll be a matter of policy as much as possible to ignore deliberate junk and filth on Broadway and give consideration to serious theatrical effort off-Broadway. That may be arbitrary in some cases, but so be it. Survival requires it.[37]

Morrison is still not prepared to go off-off-Broadway, probably because off-off-Broadway in his mind has assumed the role of experimentation that had been the domain of off-Broadway in the nineteen fifties. For many, off-Broadway has become as conservative as Broadway is reputed to be.

Although Morrison believes in free enterprise and is wary of state censorship, he believes that "Unless some degree of subsidy is provided, the Broadway theatre may disappear." In a column entitled "Fabulous Invalid May Be Terminal Case," he writes:

> When George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart wrote a play called "The Fabulous Invalid" the title became part of the language. In recognition of the remarkable ability of the stage to survive since the beginning of recorded history, the common assumption that the theatre will continue to exist is not necessarily justified, however.
>
> Horse-drawn transportation has become virtually extinct, and it is perhaps older than the drama and may once have seemed a more basic human need. The fact that the Broadway theatre declined last season to a new low in number of productions and

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[37]Herald News, November 15, 1974, p. 15.

> artistic quality is significant because it reflected the general deterioration of the stage throughout the world--a degeneration that has been evident for about 40 years.
>
> The obvious disturbing situation is that when we speak fondly of the Fabulous Invalid, on the comforting assumption that the theatre will again somehow survive this growing crisis, as it has invariably returned to vigorous health after previous illnesses, we may be deluding ourselves. The ageless truism, "And this too shall pass away," may turn out to be false in this case.
>
> The consistent trend of the last 40 years has been a decrease in the number of productions on Broadway--and also in London, Paris and the other theatrical centers throughout the world . . .[38]

Furthermore, he considers that, "this happens to be a fallow period in the theatre--and to some extent in all the arts."[39] He laments the scarcity of outstanding writers who are indispensable to a vital theatre though he recognizes the importance of good directors, actors and designers; for Morrison good writers are still the key. "The arts are full of hack writers . . . writing talent is rarer and more valuable than gold."[40]

Morrison, ever the optimist, does believe that although no one is able to predict when there will be a renaissance in the theatre, it is inevitable that one will occur.

> When such a thing happens--a period like the 1920's and '30's in the drama, with playwrights corresponding to O'Neill,

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[38]Herald News, July 14, 1971, p. 47.

[39]Herald News, December 30, 1969, p. 16.

[40]Herald News, September 26, 1975, p. 18.

> Sherwood, Barry, Kaufman and Hart, Rice, Odets, Kingsley, Behrman et al, or the 1920's through the '40's with composers and lyricists comparable to Berlin, Gershwin, Kern, Rodgers, Hart, Hammerstein and Youmans--Broadway might have the most fruitful and exciting period in its history.
>
> When it comes, as it's bound to, that won't deter people from complaining about what's wrong with the theatre. Nothing could do that. For some stage observers, however, such a renaissance would make the complaints--and the proposed solutions--seem insignificant. For the moment, the basic thing wrong with the theatre is not enough shows are good enough.[41]

Morrison does not believe that repertory companies would make the theatre artistically superior and more challenging than the current plays that are "mired in the commercialism of Broadway."[42] Recent crises, e.g. the Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center, and the earlier fall of the A.P.A. Phoenix, confirmed his belief.

> A repertory policy is no magic theatrical formula. Although it has been increasingly fashionable in stage circles to equate repertory with quality, it is primarily actors and students of the classic drama who are most enthusiastic. In general, the average show goer--the public--isn't interested, and in most cases, doesn't even know exactly what repertory means.
>
> Repertory operation is excessively expensive. It involves the steady employment of a large company and consequently higher actor payroll, frequent changes of scenery and costumes and thereby steeper bills for stagehands, departmental help,

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[41] Herald News, December 30, 1969, p. 16.

[42] Bergen Record, September 25, 1965, p. 18.

> storage facilities and costs, more office personnel and increased advertising outlay.[43]

Morrison does not think that regional theatre will succeed Broadway as the premiere American theatre either.

> Big city snobbery has always been infuriating to people from smaller communities, which may help to explain the resentment of regional drama organizations to the professional show business element of Broadway.[44]
>
> It's curious how the recent years of declining health of the Broadway stage seems to give satisfaction to regional theatre people. For example, Joan Bunke (no puns please), writing in the Des Moines Register about midwest stock and repertory troupes, says they have been "quietly blooming into health while the perennial invalid Broadway has been staggering along, reviving itself periodically with draughts of elixir of theatre, much of it British-concocted."[45]
>
> She seemingly chooses to ignore, or isn't aware, that invalid Broadway has had another of its fabulous rallies and is in robust health at this moment. She might consider that the regional theatre itself is, as always taking elixirs in the form of not only British-concocted works, but as its main diet, Broadway-oriented plays.[46]

Although he acknowledges that regional theatre enjoys popular appeal in major regional centers in such diverse areas as Minneapolis, Houston, and Washington, D.C., he still sees a difference in the standards of regional theatre and the professional standards of Broadway. The American

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[43]Herald News, July 31, 1969, p. 29.

[44]Herald News, October 3, 1970, p. 22.

[45]Herald News, July 22, 1975, p. 12.

[46]Ibid.

National Theatre and Academy's 1969 experimental season of guest engagements on Broadway by regional, off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway groups were disappointing. "All the shows were arrant turkeys. They had been hot stuff to local audiences, but not a single regional production was up to Broadway standards."[47]

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[47]Herald News, January 29, 1973, p. 24.

CHAPTER VIII:

HOW PROFESSIONALS PERCEIVE HIM

How is Morrison perceived and his influence evaluated by professional Broadway? Robert Landry, managing editor at Variety, is disturbed by Morrison's association with other papers, and believes that Morrison's chief function at Variety today is as a critic--not Variety's original intention. According to Landry, "it is because of the work that Morrison has had to put into those other papers that he just does not have the time to effectively handle the reportorial and editorial aspects of his job."[1]

Landry's perception is not generally shared by others familiar with Morrison and the Broadway theatre. Morrison is viewed by most theatre professionals as "a newspaperman on a trade newspaper."[2] Men of such divergent backgrounds as William Goldman, author of the Broadway critique, The Season[3] and Howard Stein, associate dean of the Yale School of Drama believe that Morrison is "a very good reporter."[4] In fact, it is in his reportorial role rather than as a reviewer that Morrison appears to have his strongest impact

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[1]Robert Landry, personal interview, New York, New York, May 24, 1974.

[2]Willard Swire, personal interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[3]William Goldman, telephone interview, New York, New York, April 10, 1974.

[4]Howard Stein, personal interview, New York, New York, May 12, 1975.

on the theatre community. Jack Schlissel, a former long-time general manager for David Merrick, and presently an independent producer, finds that "Morrison's maximum effect on Broadway is as a top-notch theatre and drama reporter."[5] Another prominent producer, Morton Gottlieb, agrees that "as a journalist, Morrison is very, very important because of his interpretation of certain trends and events."[6] Playwright Neil Simon sees Morrison's role at Variety "fairly evenly divided between his reportorial and critical functions,"[7] but agrees with producer Richard Barr that "Morrison has relatively little effect as a critic, but achieves considerable notice as an editor and reporter."[8] According to Simon, "when people read a banner headline in Variety over one of Morrison's news stories they'll take notice and discuss that rather than a particular review of his."[9]

Simon himself was the subject of such a news story. Morrison, in 1972, estimated that Simon was receiving a $10,000 a week royalty from the television program based

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[5]Jack Schlissel, personal interview, New York, New York, March 21, 1974.

[6]Morton Gottlieb, personal interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[7]Neil Simon, telephone interview, New York, New York, June 6, 1974.

[8]Richard Barr, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 1, 1974.

[9]Neil Simon, telephone interview, New York, New York, June 6, 1974.

on The Odd Couple. In fact, Simon was receiving no payment and was outraged:

> That really hurt me. Morrison had the facts all wrong. He didn't do his homework and had miscalculated my entire income by nearly five or six times what I really make. What bothered me even though he printed a retraction as soon as he learned that what he had written wasn't true, was that every out-of-town newspaper, when talking about me, quoted the original figure.
>
> It bothered me that there was such an inaccuracy. In the case of The Odd Couple, Hobe had said he called a TV guy in California and asked him, "What do you think Neil Simon made on The Odd Couple?" Then Hobe was told, "I don't know, I don't think he makes more than $10,000 a week." On that flimsy basis Morrison wrote that I get $10,000 a week on The Odd Couple. He then multiplied that by fifty-two because there are fifty-two weeks in the year, and therefore concluded that I made a half million dollars a year from it. The truth is, of course, that I received no royalty.[10]

Simon told Morrison that Morrison had made an error. He indicated that Morrison's story was responsible in part for his decision to leave the theatre for two or three

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[10]Neil Simon, telephone interview, New York, New York, June 6, 1974. It should be pointed out that Simon is annoyed where there is any discussion of his finances appearing in the press. He has said, "Even if Hobe had been right in his estimates I would have been very angry. What one makes is one's own business. Stories about my income can affect some critics. These men, rather than review my plays objectively, might be adversely influenced by the size of my income. Along these lines, I could never understand why, once, when I did make forty-five thousand dollars in one week (as I had several plays on Broadway) the press immediately printed that item. They didn't print that Elvis Presley makes a hundred thousand a week in Las Vegas. I guess they don't expect a writer, especially a playwright, to make a lot of money." (Ibid.)

years and to accept one of several offers he had received to teach playwrighting at a university. Although Simon was offering Morrison a Broadway scoop of the first magnitude, the fact that Simon linked his move to a university to Morrison's story bothered Morrison. He described Simon as "a remarkable talent and intelligence,"[11] but in his letter to Emmanuel Azenberg, the producer, he denied that his story had caused Simon to leave Broadway.

> What Neil Simon may choose to do with his career and his remarkable talent and intelligence is entirely his responsibility, not even slightly mine. I think it's belittling and perhaps insulting to him to suggest otherwise. Unless I misjudge him, he's too mature and sensible, too poised and professional and realistic to go hide for long on some campus. Certainly not because Hobe Morrison wrote an inaccurate story . . . Whatever he does, though, he's a big boy now, not some whimpering infant, and it's his responsibility alone.[12]

That Morrison could make a Neil Simon leave the theatre is doubtful, but what followed is not. Soon after Morrison wrote his Variety story, Simon denied it. The implications were clear and it was now Morrison's turn to be outraged. He felt that he had been deliberately duped by an author who he thought was both a great talent and a gracious human being. Morrison had written as early as February 12, 1973 that "My story was inaccurate, for which I am unquestionably

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[11]Letter to Emmanuel Azenberg, February 12, 1973.

[12]Ibid.

to blame."[13] Now, convinced that he had been deliberately misinformed, he wrote to Simon:

> When you first told me the correction, didn't I take you at your word and make a correction--a very prominent correction in a major story under my byline? Didn't I also correct the other things you said were wrong? Didn't I additionally publish your statement that you were leaving the theatre to become a college teacher for three years?
>
> Again, I seem to have been naive. The Post subsequently quoted you as saying my story was false and that Variety is unreliable. When am I to believe you--when you talk to me or the Post? Even after you, in effect, told the Post I am a liar, did I slap back with the truth, or did I let you down gently by giving you credit for having spoken impulsively and then changing your mind? Who wrote that your reconsideration was good news for the theatre and the public?[14]

The Simon incident is mentioned in detail not only because it demonstrates the effect Morrison's news stories have on important theatre personalities but because it illuminates an important aspect of his own character, i.e., his ability to keep his personal feelings from affecting his reviews. Morrison is fervent in his belief that, above all, a review must be fair and honest. Soon after Morrison found out that Simon may have "set him up," he had lunch with Harvey Sabinson, Simon's publicist and a friend of both men.

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Hobe Morrison, letter to Neil Simon, March 16, 1973.

> Hobe was furious at Simon and terribly disillusioned that one of his idols had feet of clay and would get so disturbed that Simon, a man that was known to make $25-30,000 a week, would want to pulverize Hobe Morrison. Yet, at this lunch, Hobe, disturbed as he was, said, "I don't understand, I just don't understand, but I'll never let it affect one of my reviews. If I see one of his plays that I like, I'll still say that I like it.[15]

True to his convictions, when Simon opened The Good Doctor on Broadway, Morrison's review was one of the few raves. Simon wrote:

> Dear Hobe,
> Just wanted to drop you a line for your very nice review in today's Variety and to say that it pleased me very much. I appreciate it.
> Most sincerely,
> Neil[16]

Morrison replied:

> Dear Neil,
> Thanks for your note. I appreciate your taking the time and trouble to write it.
> With best wishes as always,
> Hobe Morrison[17]

In spite of their differences, Simon admits to being impressed with Morrison's sense of integrity as a critic. "Interestingly enough, while Hobe and I had our differences at that time, they did not affect Hobe's reviews. Hobe is

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[15]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, Queens, New York, March 6, 1974.

[16]Neil Simon, undated letter to Hobe Morrison [Dec., 1973].

[17]Hobe Morrison, letter to Neil Simon, December 7, 1973.

a very fair, honest reviewer."[18]

Simon is not alone in this opinion of Morrison. In numerous interviews with theatre people, "integrity," "fairness" and "objectivity" are the characteristics most commonly applied to Morrison. To Jean Kerr:

> Hobe is a funny and charming person, but as a critic, he's tough. He's not an easy touch in any way. Hobe has reviewed a number of my plays and he didn't like about half of them. Nevertheless, I have always felt that his reviews were totally fair. Sometimes it takes me a day or a month to agree with him, but eventually I come to see what he was talking about.[19]

Richard Rodgers said of Morrison, "Hobe's reviews are extremely fair and have a salutary effect in keeping the legitimate theatre on its toes."[20] Joel Schenker, producer of over ten Broadway plays (some of which were "panned" by Morrison) wrote, "Morrison's reviews make it possible for those engaged in the theatre to have a reasonable and objective point of view about the work that is being offered on our stage. He writes his criticisms without fear or favor."[21] Kermit Bloomgarden, too, found Morrison "a decent man whom I respect."[22]

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[18]Neil Simon, telephone interview, New York, New York, June 6, 1974.

[19]Jean Kerr, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 21, 1974.

[20]Personal letter from Richard Rodgers, June 5, 1974.

[21]Personal letter from Joel W. Schenker, May 2, 1974.

[22]Kermit Bloomgarden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

Sometimes Morrison's sense of integrity carries beyond the theatre or the copyroom. Fred Golden, along with others, notes:

> I've never been able to pick up a check for lunch with Hobe--we always go "dutch." I think that he goes dutch with everybody. I don't think that you can pick up a check with Hobe. I feel it's silly and we often argue about this. After all, it is customary for a publicist to pick up the tab for the critic. For the P.R. man it's a legitimate tax deduction. Anyway, we often argue about this and Hobe always makes the point, "You'll pay yours and I'll pay mine." Hobe is very concerned lest the slightest situation makes it appear that he is compromising his claim to independent judgments.[23]

Part of Morrison's job as a drama editor is to publish the weekly receipts of each occupied Broadway theatre. When he took over as Variety's drama editor in 1948, he discovered that his predecessor had been given inaccurate figures during his last years. Morrison was determined that this would not happen to him. Robert Whitehead finds Morrison "a veritable crusader, who has an innate sense of justice and doesn't like being lied to."[24] According to Richard Horner, "if there's something you don't want to tell Hobe, tell him, 'Hobe, I'm not going to tell you that,' and he'll understand. But if you deliberately give him

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[23]Fred Golden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

[24]Robert Whitehead, personal interview, New York, New York, May 7, 1974.

incorrect information he gets very annoyed."[25]

In short then, "the question of integrity is something that disturbs Hobe very much. He sincerely believes that a critic must be above reproach."[26] Several people associated with the Broadway theatre have pointed out this similarity between Morrison and Brooks Atkinson. And for Morrison, Atkinson remains the personification of integrity.

Another aspect of Morrison's work as a reviewer that is held in high esteem is his "ability to spot intellectual and artistic pretension."[27] Joseph Papp finds that "Morrison isn't fooled by artistic fluff that lacks honest theatrical power."[28] Richard Horner agrees:

> I find that Hobe sees the pretension and he's not taken in by the way something is done, as are some of the critics. Many of the critics will go all out for some bit of unusual staging or something that has an unusual appeal. This is not true of Hobe. He will like something that is very well produced or very theatrical that may not in fact necessarily work.[29]

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[25]Richard Horner, personal interview, New York, New York, May 9, 1974.

[26]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, New York, New York, March 6, 1974.

[27]William Goldman telephone interview, New York, New York, April 10, 1974.

[28]Joseph Papp, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[29]Richard Horner, personal interview, New York, New York, May 9, 1974.

In the opinion of Arthur Miller, Morrison "is not pretentious and is not a phony. He reviews what is on the stage rather than use the play as an excuse to write an essay. What I like about Morrison is that he's not in competion with the playwright. He reports what's actually on the stage with no nonsense."[30]

Morrison does accept plays as they are. He does not try to promote any particular play or group of plays as a vehicle to reform the theatre.

> Morrison does not impose himself on his comments. He does not dramatize himself nor does he conduct a campaign for revision of the theatre. He takes what he sees without qualification. As a reviewer for Variety he is expected to make some comments on the box office aspects of a production. But he does not write box office reviews. I think his record of candor and appreciation is very high indeed. I don't know anyone else whose judgment is so sound and wholesome and who has never used his reviews of theatre productions to build his own personal career.[31]

Indeed, Atkinson is not alone in his estimate of Morrison's ability. Morrison is generally considered to have "an extremely acute and central sense of what theatre is about and how audiences respond."[32] John Beaufort of The Christian Science Monitor finds Morrison "to be one of the

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[30]Arthur Miller, personal interview, New York, New York, May 12, 1975.

[31]Letter from Brooks Atkinson, April 11, 1974.

[32]Letter from Walter Kerr, June 22, 1974.

most experienced, if not the most experienced critics writing,"[33] and concludes that Morrison "writes fairly and accurately."[34]

Morrison's judgment as to a play's commercial potential is, in Joel Schenker's opinion, "undoubtedly the best in the business today."[35] Jean Kerr concurs.

> If Hobe says something is going to run, he's right ninety percent of the time. It's better than the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval," even though it may not be read by that many "civilians."[36]

Morrison does not estimate his ability to predict a play's future so highly. "I may be right eighty percent of the time, but that's not a great record, for even if you'd panned everything, you're bound to be right eighty to ninety percent of the time."[37] His readers are not deterred by his statement, however.

His professional readers also believe that Morrison truly enjoys seeing good theatre.

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[33]John Beaufort, telephone interview, New York, New York, April 25, 1974.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Letter from Joel Schenker, May 2, 1974.

[36]Jean Kerr, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 21, 1974.

[37]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

> I believe that Morrison enjoys going to the theatre more than other critics. He sees going to the theatre as something to respect and something to have a good time at. Some critics, I believe, really hate going to the theatre. They are the critics who have lost their verve and their respect for the theatre. I believe that Hobe is always in anticipation of seeing something good. Other critics want to see something good too, but at the same time seem to want to pounce on something that they don't like.[38]

> Morrison has a love of the theatre in him, what we call "show business"--a kind of deep feeling about it and I like that when I read him. I have a feeling he's in my kind of group without putting on literary pretentions. I feel good about that and that makes me feel positive.[39]

Jean Kerr adds this remark on his respect for the theatre:

> I always think of Hobe as sort of "guarding the gates." It enrages Hobe if people are one second late to a show, if they don't respond politely, or if anybody talks. It's a sense of, "By God, you're in the theatre, you slob." Hobe doesn't take himself seriously, he takes the theatre seriously. He expects people to shape up when they get in there.[40]

What is Morrison's influence on the Broadway theatre? Probably the best way to respond to this question is to estimate what influence any critic may have. It is generally

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[38]Morton Gottlieb, personal interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1973.

[39]Joseph Papp, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[40]Jean Kerr, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 21, 1974.

assumed that the New York Times is the ultimate arbiter of which play will succeed and which play will fail. However, according to William Goldman:

> . . . the influence of the critics has been debated for years. The Theatregoers Study indicates that twenty percent of New Yorkers and ten percent of out-of-towners say they are chiefly influenced by the notices. These figures, of course, are only what people will admit; still, it's probably fair to estimate roughly that one person in six attends a production because of critical enthusiasm.[41]

Jean Kerr argues that it is impossible to assess the effect of a critic:

> David Merrick, at one point, polled everyone coming to see his plays in order to find the critic that influenced them the most. Merrick found that the overwhelming majority had chosen Walter [Kerr]. Now, two out of the three shows Merrick was polling Walter had panned, so if they were such fans of Walter, what were they doing at those shows? It doesn't make any sense.[42]

As for Morrison's influence to draw audiences to a particular play, there is agreement that it is minimal.

> Hobe's reviews mean very little as to the success or failure of a play. In fact, they mean nothing at all. This is primarily true because of the fact that Variety is a trade paper and Hobe writes for those of us in the trade.

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[41]William Goldman, The Season, p. 71.

[42]Jean Kerr, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 21, 1974.

> Variety has no effect in getting people to see a show. Nobody reads Variety to determine whether they want to see the show or not.[43]

Excerpts from Morrison's Variety reviews are seldom used in advertising campaigns designed to attract the public. In fact, when they are used, it is often because the New York daily press, the major monthly magazines, and the TV critics have delivered contrasting reviews. It is interesting to note that ad agencies will often use a quotation from the Herald News rather than the same quotation from the Morrison review in Variety. This is so, presumably, because the Herald News, unlike Variety, is concerned with the general public. As Bloomgarden indicates,[44] Morrison, who is best known for his work on Variety, addresses himself to a highly selective Variety readership of less than fifty thousand (composed mainly of theatre professionals).

Finally, Morrison's Variety reviews have little audience power because often they appear several days after a play has opened. By the time the Variety notice comes out, the "verdict" has already appeared in the New York dailies as well as on TV and radio. Variety's Broadway review is too little and too late.[45]

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[43]Kermit Bloomgarden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

[44]Ibid.

[45]It is widely believed that Variety's out-of-town critics, especially those reporting from important tryout towns such as New Haven, Boston and Philadelphia, have far more impact on a play's future than Variety's Broadway reviews, for those notices have the power to focus attention

Although Morrison does not directly affect the popularity of a play, his reviews may have some limited influence in other ways. Probably up to the early 1960's Morrison's opinions of a play's film possibilities were important, particularly when they appeared in Variety's west coast edition. Fred Golden, whose advertising agency, Blaine Thompson, handles much of Broadway advertising, notes that local producers are very interested in what Hobe says, especially when he says that a particular property would make a good film.

> After a show opens that we handle we have meetings in our offices and we try to speak to many people about the show's potential. We usually try to get Variety, or if the paper hasn't come out yet I'll call Hobe and ask him what he thought. The producer almost inevitably will ask me to find out what Hobe said in the final paragraphs of the review. If Hobe says, "I think it will make a pretty good film," I'll tell that to the producer and then there's always an elated effect, so I imagine it means something.[46]

What does it mean? Twenty years ago it may have meant that an astute market appraisal by Variety's reviewer contributed to the overall impression a play made on a

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on new productions, particularly ones that may not have had a well-known production staff. This is especially interesting in light of the belief held by many that, although the out-of-town notices are more significant than the Broadway reviews, the writers of these out-of-town reviews tend to be inferior critics and writers.

[46]Fred Golden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

prospective film-maker. Today it means less. The fact is that in recent years "very few plays have been bought for the movies by the major studios and if a studio is going to buy a play it is usually because the agent has submitted a script or developed some other way a producer can look at it."[47]

Furthermore, according to Norman Flicker, head of production on the East Coast for Paramount Pictures:

> Studios send out their own people on the road to see a play if it is a possibility. We see it before it gets to New York and therefore even before Hobe gets to see it. Hobe can call attention to a play if we haven't seen it by the time it gets to New York, but that is not likely to occur. The nature of our business, after all, is to get there first. It's similar to how we deal with books. We should not have to wait to decide on a book until it gets into the New York Times book section. We should have seen it right after the galleys. The speed with which we deal with a play is similar to that of a book. For this reason Hobe has a minimal effect on whether or not a play is bought by a studio.[48]

Morrison himself realizes the insignificance of his evaluating the film possibilities of a theatrical production in today's world. He says, "I don't write about film possibilities very often these days because it seems as if there are film possibilities in everything. When you get

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[47]Mary Brenner [head of Story Department, Paramount Pictures], telephone interview, New York, New York, April 25, 1974.

[48]Norman Flicker, telephone interview, New York, New York, April 25, 1974.

a gal like Linda Lovelace on, who can say what are suitable properties for film?"[49]

Ronald S. Lee, a partner in Theatre Party Associates, one of the largest theatre party companies, points out another possible effect of a Morrison Variety review.

> Morrison's review will affect the producer's thoughts regarding the commercial value of his production. So from the producer's point of view Morrison's review may very well affect how he will advertise his show. If Hobe says, "Long Run Bet For Broadway Success," or "No Good As A Broadway Entry But Definite Stock Possibilities," this all has a bearing in some way as to what the producer will do. What the producer will do affects me. If he advertises heavily it's going to have an effect on the saleability of the show for those who have bought the show. If a Jewish center has bought three hundred tickets for Words and Music for a month from now and Hobe says "Great Show, Long Range Strength," etc. it will bring Alex Cohen up to spend, perhaps, more on advertising to publicize the show more, and this can in time affect the word of mouth regarding the play.[50]

Although Lee's thoughts on Morrison's influence are not easily verified, his belief that Morrison's influence (if any) is "strictly incremental and long range"[51] is widely held among theatre professionals.

A Variety review may affect stock production rights and productions in theatres away from New York. There are

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[49]Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, March 28, 1974.

[50]Ronald S. Lee, personal interview, New York, New York, April 24, 1974.

[51]Ibid.

production centers throughout the U.S. and producers are aware of what is happening in New York, partly by what they read in Variety. Furthermore, the Variety review, unlike others, is concerned with what will attract audiences in smaller cities and towns. A similar effect may be noted in foreign areas. Curiosity as to what is happening on the Broadway stage is high. A Variety review may affect the decision of a London or Swedish or other foreign producer to produce or not to produce a play.

Even though it would appear that Morrison has no major effect on the eventual success or failure of a Broadway production that can be verified, why do Broadway professionals read (and they do indeed read) Morrison's reviews? Ronald Lee answers this question by asking another. "Why does one doctor talk to another doctor rather than to a patient?"[52] Lee goes on to discuss the reason often stated by professionals for reading Morrison's reviews:

> Morrison is writing as one theatre professional to another in an objective, honest, no nonsense fashion. When I read a review by Clive Barnes, for example, I am reading a professional writer who is writing for a mass audience. I read the Clive Barnes review with an eye to how he's affecting my business and all my customers, who also will be reading his reviews. When I read Hobe Morrison's review I know he's not writing for my customers nor are my customers going to read his review. It is because of this fact that I know Morrison is looking at a play as a total professional--a professional theatre-goer.[53]

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[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid.

Morrison's professional Broadway audience believes that his judgment is free of the pressures that may affect a reviewer who writes primarily for the general public. It follows, therefore, that his reviews are among the most objective. Kermit Bloomgarden said, "Hobe is very objective in his criticism because he has no axes to grind. He sees it as it is and then makes a judgment as to the commercial aspects of the play."[54] Furthermore, his readership believes that he has the ability to recognize the intent of a production, i.e., what the producer and the artists he has gathered together have tried to achieve. And last, Morrison's opinion is respected because theatre practitioners feel that Morrison understand, unlike many critics, the relationship between the business and artistic sides of the Broadway theatre. Another prominent producer had this in mind when he said:

> Hobe sees what I am trying to do and this makes me feel better even if the show is unsuccessful. For example, we did a play early this year called Crown Matrimonial. I thought it was extremely well done. Although it was a failure, it was a near miss. When Hobe said in his review that it was a "handsome theatrical production, beautifully staged," I thought at least he feels about it the same way I feel about it, even though I knew that it wasn't going to succeed. The fact that Hobe said that made me feel better.[55]

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[54]Kermit Bloomgarden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

[55]Richard Horner, personal interview, New York, New York, May 9, 1974.

Morrison's understanding of what a production is trying to achieve also relates to the playwright. Robert Anderson stated categorically that "Hobe understands my work. What I look for in a critic is that he should understand what I put there. Certainly it is important that a critic likes your play, but it is secondary to his understanding what you put there and Hobe does understand."[56]

Neil Simon also believes that Morrison has a decided effect on his work.

> Morrison generally affects me in terms of the next play I'm going to write, since the fate of the show has usually been decided by the time Morrison's review appears. Morrison's review often makes you think a little more clearly about what you've done and how it might affect your next play. For example, Hobe corroborated a feeling I had about The Good Doctor. I liked The Good Doctor. I thought it was a good evening's entertainment and so did Hobe. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to make the show run. I took a chance when I wrote that play in that it was not the conventional comedy many critics had expected me to write. It was quite different and because of this, these men thought I would want to write the kind of play they were used to having me do. Now, whereas these critics would not permit me to be as experimental as I would like, Hobe gave me his approval. That said to me, "Go ahead and do that, if that's what you're interested in. It means you're not necessarily interested in making lots of money and in long runs, but in doing something you think is creatively productive"--and if Hobe says that's good entertainment, that's good enough for me.[57]

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[56]Robert Anderson, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.

[57]Neil Simon, personal interview, New York, New York June 6, 1974.

Morrison's reviews are read, too, because they appear in the "Bible of Broadway," Variety. "People," according to Harvey Sabinson, "are concerned about Hobe's reviews out of the respect for Hobe and out of fear of what their peers will say after reading his review. Hobe's review represents how you are seen in the eyes of your competitors and colleagues. You cannot ignore the fact that peer pressure is very real on Broadway."[58] The idea exists of "we and them"; "them" being the public, or what Mike Todd referred to as "civilians." In this respect the Broadway theatre is quite insular. In a very short time everyone gets to know everyone else on "the street." Professionals are just that, "Professionals," and they tend to be around for a while. Within this special world, "Morrison's reviews have a prestige value for theatre people."[59] One has only to quickly peruse the pages of Variety and see the numerous advertisements that mention the name of some actor, singer or dancer, to realize that a favorable mention in a Variety review means recognition by one's own "family."

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Some people believe that Morrison would have more general respect as a critic if he weren't writing for Variety. "It is the paper, unfortunately, that makes the

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[58]Harvey Sabinson, personal interview, New York, New York, March 6, 1974.

[59]Jack Schlissel, personal interview, New York, New York, March 21, 1974.

man. If Morrison had written for the Times he would be perceived differently."[60] There are far more similarities in temperament, style, and critical outlook between a Hobe Morrison and a Brooks Atkinson than between a Morrison and a Jack Pulaski. Although Morrison has a decided interest in the commercial prospects of a play, he is by no means ignorant of a production's artistic merit. Robert Whitehead says, "there is a good chance that what Hobe Morrison might say about a production, in purely aesthetic terms, would be far more sensible and creative than what the Times or any of the other dailies would have to say."[61]

Finally, Morrison's detractors and supporters alike believe him to be a man of integrity: fair, honest and devoid of personal malice in his reviews. If Martin Gottfried is correct in believing that "A critic's power lies in his ability to command the respect of the theatre,"[62] Morrison is a far more powerful critic than one would ordinarily imagine.

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[60]Robert Anderson, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.

[61]Robert Whitehead, personal interview, New York, New York, May 7, 1974.

[62]Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided, p. 52.

CHAPTER IX:

CONCLUSION

Hobe Morrison is very much a product of his times. He grew up in an environment that strongly emphasized man's responsibility to others as well as to himself. He was taught to value the importance of hard work and he has worked hard all his life.

Morrison comes from a world that was basically optimistic, that believed in the future and the importance of man. This conviction encouraged Morrison to try to improve himself. Although his family did not truly value higher education or the arts, it seems that Morrison wanted his life to include such areas. In part, this was due to the influence of such people as the Head family, but Morrison had to be receptive or he would not have continued the pursuit on his own.

Morrison learned how to become a journalist, reviewer and columnist in much the same fashion. By imitation and by experimentation he found the method that worked best for him. Of all the models he selected, Morrison admired Brooks Atkinson the most. For Morrison, Atkinson has always remained the perfect model, not only for criticism, but in many ways, for life itself.

In looking back over Morrison's life it is clear that he had numerous obstacles to overcome before an Atkinson

would care to describe him as "the soundest critic of plays in New York."[1]

Morrison sees himself as a newspaper man who specializes in the theatre, i.e. as a reviewer. Although he uses the terms "critic" and "reviewer" interchangeably, he believes that criticism is a serious literary attempt, whereas reviewing (in general circulation newspapers) is a guide to playgoing. A Variety review, to Morrison, is a professional report to the theatre community and an attempt to gauge the commercial possibilities of a given production.

"The primary function of a reviewer," he says, "is simply to inform the reader,"[2] by "concentrating on reporting his response--emotional and intellectual--to the work he is covering."[3] With this felt mandate, Morrison does not hesitate to let his readers know if a play contains obscenity or nudity. He will acknowledge an error in judgment, and although he may not like a play, if he thinks that there are people who will, he lets the public know.

Reviewing, for Morrison, is a highly subjective art in which the writer's prejudices and personal limitations are on public display. He quotes Atkinson as having said "What he [the critic] writes reveals his mind and heart as intimately as it reveals the work of art he is criticizing.

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[1]Brooks Atkinson, personal letter, April 11, 1974.

[2]Bergen Record, December 21, 1965, p. 56.

[3]Herald News, January 14, 1976, p. 20.

In his opinion of a play or novel one can see the indecent exposure of his character. Not only his knowledge but his prejudices are there--not only his alertness but his ignorance."[4] Such exposure, to Morrison, is not harmful if the critic is "true to himself and his own opinions and attitudes."[5] If he is readable and interesting, he may stimulate further interest in the theatre and raise its standards, "assuming that he has good taste."[6]

Although Morrison works for a trade paper, he is not insensitive to the artistic, creative aspects of a production. He believes that a "successful season" can be measured by the number of artistic works of quality that are produced. Though the artistic and commercial values of a play may differ, he still believes that plays of quality may often enjoy public support.

This last judgment would appear to be a serious critical shortcoming. Whereas audiences often do respond to plays that have artistic merit, often they do not. Similarly, his belief that his own tastes act as a barometer of public approval has also proven unreliable.

I believe that Morrison definitely falls into Watts' classification of reviewers. Watts describes a reviewer as:

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[4]Herald News, December 24, 1974, p. 56.

[5]Bergen Record, December 21, 1965, p. 56.

[6]Ibid.

"a sentimentalist, romanticist and idealist to the ultimate degree, who goes to the theatre not eager to sharpen his poison pen, but in the high determination to encounter the occasional wonderwork."[7] After more than forty years of reviewing, Morrison still feels that "an enjoyable show offers not only momentary entertainment but also lasting pleasure."[8]

Morrison pleads for more humility in critics in the belief that the critics' self-esteem is not shared by anyone else. Morrison wants the critic to remain in the background in respect to the play he is reviewing, "ever conscious that the reader is interested primarily in the show and only secondarily (or less), in the critic."[9] He finds that "Unbridled ego in a reviewer, turning out criticism intended to attract attention to himself rather than the show, is simply exhibitionism."[10]

It is Morrison's opinion that if reviewers are readable and interesting, stimulating interest in the theatre, they are constructive, even though their reviews may hasten the demise of "poor" plays and temporarily deprive theatre professionals of a livelihood. Following

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[7]Richard Watts, New York Herald Tribune, March 2, 1941, as quoted by Mark Alan Shoenberg, "The Dramatic Criticism of Richard Watts, Jr.," p. 45.

[8]Herald News, January 16, 1969, p. 21.

[9]Herald News, January 14, 1976, p. 20.

[10]Ibid.

his line of reasoning, "a readable, provocative critic is constructive, even though he may be severe. A dull, prosaic critic, in contrast, is destructive, even though he may be kindly."[11]

Morrison does not regard his fellow reviewers highly; he finds them pompous, egocentric and overrated. He particularly dislikes critics who engage in personal attacks, agreeing with Ezra Pound that "You can spot the bad critic when he starts discussing the poet and not the poem."[12] Morrison would urge his peers to remember that:

> Critics represent an authority that no intelligent man recognizes. That is the comic thing about them--authority without franchise, the form without the substance, dignity without respect, law giving without the consent of the governed.[13]

Although there is no sure formula for writing a Broadway hit, Morrison follows certain guidelines in attempting to predict a play's prospects. These guidelines incorporate a concern for whether a work will be pleasing to a popular audience. He argues that to be entertaining a play must have a single, believable protagonist with whom the audience can identify and "root

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[11]Bergen Record, December 21, 1965, p. 56.

[12]Herald News, March 18, 1970, p. 23.

[13]Brooks Atkinson, as quoted by Hobe Morrison, Herald News, October 24, 1974, p. 56.

for" in a credible situation. The subject of the play should be "pleasant," and the theme clear and affirmative and the plot compelling. A happy ending is also desirable.

In addition, for the production to be more than merely pleasant, the plot must have "verve."

In serious plays he asks that the audience be allowed to experience, at the very least, a sense of shared experience or feeling. On the other hand, if a drama deals with essentailly "unpleasant" material, a sense of shared experience is not enough. The audience must then also be uplifted, enlightened, or both.

He also frankly admits being a "soft touch for anything sentimental or emotional."[14] He finds this preference shared by the Broadway audience. When it comes to a choice between sentiment and sophistication, this audience, he affirms, nearly always opts for the former.

With respect to acting, Morrison distinguishes between a performer, who always plays himself, and an actor, who assumes the role of the character he is playing. He finds that both have a place in the theatre; the performer in musicals and comedies, and the actor primarily in serious plays.

Morrison candidly admits that he knows little about acting and acknowledges that, in the final analysis, "We

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[14]Herald News, July 10, 1969, p. 34.

think an actor is good if we like his personality and vice versa."[15] Nevertheless, his important tests for successful acting are "believability," "level of role difficulty" and "theoretical casting." He is more consistently favorable toward acting than any other element in his criticism. The reasons for this are not clear, though it can be argued that, knowing as little as he does about the craft, he gives an actor the benefit of the doubt. For an actor or performer to be a successful star, he must possess a magnetic personality coupled with enormous authority on stage. Morrison concedes, however, that in the final analysis, star quality is a mystery. He is more specific about the requirements needed to become a good actor: robust health, talent and determination plus concentration, discipline, economy, attention to detail, technical finesse, good posture and good speaking habits.

Morrison's comments concerning the other elements of production pursue similar themes to those discussed earlier. His middle class tastes are evident in his preference for melodic music, simple, sentimental lyrics, settings that clearly establish time and place, lighting that does not sacrifice illumination for mood and a stage that is of traditional proscenium design.

He also exhibits an appreciation for professionalism and craftsmanship, as revealed in his criteria for all

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[15]Bergen Record, January 23, 1967, p. A-22.

areas of production, that is indicative of the Broadway theatre, and an antipathy for the amateurish and experimental aspects of production that he associates with off-off-Broadway and avant-garde "subsidized" theatres.

He continues to emphasize his dislike for pretentiousness in the form of egocentric direction, choreography, set design, and lighting that draws attention to itself at the expense of the production as a whole.

Also, his essentially pragmatic orientation is revealed in his consideration of the economic imperatives implicit in designing a set, a stage, or even a theatre, with the key word being "utilitarian." Accordingly, while he believes a good set design is most utilitarian if it is highly flexible, he argues that there is greater utility in a single purpose theatre than one designed for "flexible" staging.

He is not easily deceived by gimmicks and technical effects that might disguise an inferior play. In fact, his comments on set, lighting and costumes, while they do not usually occupy much space in his reviews, generally are precise and perceptive and often underscore his keen appreciation and sharp eye for technical proficiency.

Morrison's opinion with respect to the elements of production demonstrates his honesty. He is not afraid to admit, unlike many critics, that he cannot easily evaluate a director's part in a play, or pick out a hit

song on the basis of only one hearing. It is this quality of honesty that probably is his greatest asset as a reviewer.

What is the significance of Morrison's reviews? They have no discernable impact on the length of a play's run. At one time his reviews may have influenced production sales to motion picture companies; however, for at least twenty years, his comments on film potential have had little effect. Nevertheless, his reviews are not without value. They are important as professional reports to theatre professionals who cannot find this kind of criticism anywhere else. They represent the Broadway theatre's opinion of itself and constitute a unique critical history of Broadway of over forty years. Also, Morrison's commercial influence may be significant in determining subtle production decisions. His ability to spot trends and assess audience taste can possibly affect what plays are produced and how they are advertised. His comments may help shape opinion in stock companies and regional theatres and give "the Broadway point of view" to theatre watchers in other countries.

Readers who have followed Morrison for years realize that he is conservative and does not like unconventional, iconoclastic theatre. Some believe that this is because he is "a strict moralist at heart,"[16] or that in his

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[16]Robert Anderson, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 16, 1974.

formative years his cultural attitudes were "shaped by puritanical forces."[17] Yet, in spite of his moral code, he is not a prude. Sex and violence, as we have seen, irritate him when used excessively or strictly for sensationalism.

Although Morrison never attended college, he is generally acknowledged to be a well-read and erudite man. His anti-intellectual posture is not based on a lack of knowledge, although it can be argued that the theatre of ideas intimidates him because of his limited formal education, and may also partially explain his hostility to many avant-garde works. What most often repels Morrison in these plays, however, is ideology. It is because he does understand what he sees and hears that he reacts so harshly to the form and content of such plays.

Having been influenced by the theatre of the 30's and 40's, he is resistant to changes that he believes are phony, pretentious and artificial. It is in the mainstream of theatre that he feels most comfortable. Joe Papp believes that:

> Morrison is like most critics when they pass a certain age. They somehow lose contact with newer trends. There is a certain distance with respect to what is being written today and what has been written thirty years ago. Consequently,

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[17]Sol Jacobson, personal interview, New York, New York, April 22, 1974.

> Morrison's opinions are generally much more trustworthy in an area of his own period, i.e. plays that are like the plays of the late thirties and forties, or those plays themselves.[18]

Maybe this accounts for the generally uniform praise of Morrison's critical acumen by many producers and theatre professionals who have had a long association with Broadway.[19] When they say that Morrison has "good taste"[20] it may mean that their own taste is not very different, or when they say that "Morrison is highly anxious to have real professionals on Broadway and not people who are fumbling around learning their trade,"[21] they are speaking equally for themselves. Such individuals are as conservative as Morrison and just as resistant to change. Many of these men were influenced by the same theatre as Morrison and as businessmen believe that "intellectual" plays do not sell on Broadway and that nudity and obscenity are offensive to "Broadwayites." They were just as surprised as Morrison to discover that an unorthodox musical such as Hair might attract a Broadway audience.

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[18]Joseph Papp, telephone interview, New York, New York, May 13, 1974.

[19]In considering the validity of the comments made by many men who could be affected by a poor Variety review, the writer deliberately sought to distinguish an individual's personal attitude towards Morrison from remarks that seemed to belong to a more general perception of the man and his work.

[20]Fred Golden, personal interview, New York, New York, May 2, 1974.

[21]Sol Jacobson, personal interview, New York, New York, April 22, 1974.

Morrison does not disagree with Papp's appraisal.

> I think that I'm out of touch. Maybe I'm jaded. I like the "well-made play." I like a play about attractive characters. I like the plays of the twenties and thirties.
>
> On the other hand, I do not like the plays of Ionesco, Beckett, and others, which I consider ugly and defeatist. I don't think I know any more than Ionesco about whether man will survive, but I would not be me if I didn't believe that you just have to do the best you can.
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> This attitude has affected my reviewing in that I respond to a play that's affirmative and do not respond to one that's negative. But negative plays are in style today.
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> I don't like a lot of plays that are commercial. That's precisely what I mean I guess. In general, I believe that what's good enough will be commercial. I think I express the attitude of an older generation, a past generation.
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> Brooks Atkinson was in a position to retire when he reached that point. I think he was about sixty-five when he retired as a critic because he felt he was out of touch. I feel the same way he did but I can't afford to quit. I think it would be better, perhaps, for the theatre, although I don't believe anybody's reviews have that much effect; but for whatever effect it has I think it would be important for the theatre if I didn't write.
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> It doesn't discourage me that I'm getting out of touch. Everybody gets out of touch with his times.[22]

Morrison's thoughts about quitting may still be premature because the theatre that he knows best: big, bright musicals, Neil Simon comedies, and "uplifting" drama, remain the mainstay of Broadway rather than the "obscurantist,

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[22] Hobe Morrison, personal interview, New York, New York, June 14, 1974.

nihilist, formless, and deliberatley sordid plays"[23] that he so dislikes. His "Theatre of Excellence"[24] has become a fortress of the mature and the reasonable, the traditional and the conservative in the eternal struggle with anarchistic forces that desire only to destroy it. It is interesting to note, however, in dealing with such playwrights as Shaw and O'Casey, whom Morrison admires, that in their own day they might have been perceived as "experimental" playwrights by a contemporary conservative critic. Does Morrison accept them now, even though they might have been ahead of their own times because they have since received general acceptance?

Morrison recognizes the need for different theatres but resents what he sees as the theatre of the amateur. In his opinion, "the best friends of the theatre" are the theatre professionals, "the day to day practitioners whose seemingly self-expressive efforts make it work" as opposed to "the vociferous commentators with scorn for existing conditions and lofty proposals for improvement."[25]

Morrison is not pessimistic about Broadway's future.

> Although the fact seems to enrage some people, the creative force of the theatre in this hemisphere centers on Broadway. The ultimate professional opportunities and rewards are here. Inevitably, then, so are the greatest challenges and inspirations.[26]

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[23]Bergen Record, December 23, 1967, p. 18.

[24]Bergen Record, July 9, 1965, p. 19.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

In a poll some years ago of first string reviewers in New York, Variety found that "accuracy," "independence," and "fairness" were considered the three prime objectives of a drama critic. "To tell the truth as he understands it," was the way Brooks Atkinson summed up a critic's function.[27] Without doubt Hobe Morrison has achieved these goals.

It can be said of Morrison, who has covered the theatre for 44 years, something akin to what Variety said of itself after covering show business for 50 years, namely that "he has tried to be himself, both in his style and in his forthright opinions."[28] His integrity as a critic remains unblemished and his reviews have been accepted as honest and fair reflections of the professional theatre's point of view. He remains the guardian and foremost proponent of the theatre of Broadway as he sees it.

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[27]Variety, July 17, 1957, p. 1.

[28]Variety, January 12, 1957, p. 2. Variety actually wrote: "Variety has tried to be itself, both in its style and its forthright reporting."

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