The Future in Me: American Theatre and Criticism in the New Millennium

By Kerri Allen
American Theatre Critics Association
October 2006
IATC World Congress
Seoul, Republic of Korea

When Yun-Cheol Kim invited me to speak on New Theatricality in Criticism in the United States, I was honored if not a bit overwhelmed. I do not have a doctorate in dramaturgy and I am the author of not a single book. And as you may know, I am the youngest invited speaker at this Congress.

In the interest of full disclosure, I was born in 1979. I'm sure many of you were already chief critics or full professors by that time.

I began reviewing theatre eight years ago while I was still a student at Rutgers University. During my second year, I took an advanced theatre criticism course with Dr. Eileen Blumenthal, a recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism, the highest award an American drama critic can receive. New York City was a short train ride away, and I was able to review Broadway and off-Broadway shows in addition to regional theatre and university productions.

Two years ago, I began writing—pro bono—for a New York-based website called OffOffOnline, which quite obviously covers off-off-Broadway productions. Now, my résumé of criticism and theatre writing includes *The New York Times, Time Out New York, Back Stage, American Theatre* magazine, an international journal *Estreno* (*Debut*) and others. I am young, but with this youth comes energy.

I will not insult this distinguished audience by attempting to provide a history lesson of American theatre. What I feel I can offer this Congress, however, is the honest point of view

of someone who is 27 and working in this industry in a world hub of theatre. I will try not to talk theory. I'll talk practice, since that's what I do.

When we talk of "new" theatricality, we are speaking about theatre between 2000 and today: 21st-century theatre.

My colleagues in New York and I have not seen vast changes in this new millennium. Perhaps we should have. After all, in the past six years the United States has seen 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the war in Iraq. What are our playwrights, our alleged cultural barometers, reflecting back to the public about life in contemporary America?

Robert Brustein's answer is "nothing." The well-known scholar and chief theater critic for *The New Republic* magazine based in Washington, D.C. wrote an article last September about theatre after 9/11. He said:

> "This disjunction between stage and audience may help to explain why public interest in the stage is dwindling. At the same time that Broadway, when not recycling popular movies in musical form (*The Lion King, The Producers, Monty Python's Spamalot*), is busy pondering the tribulations of gay baseball players and teenage spelling bee nerds, the rest of the country is worrying about terrorism, body counts, the environment, nuclear proliferation, poverty, the mismanagement of the economy, the futility of the Iraq war, and all the other pressing issues botched by Bush."

He goes on to assert that "a play that provokes pity and terror is not incompatible with a night on the town." I wonder.

Most people I know are not theatergoers. If and when my friends go to see a play, it's because they know someone involved. It is often done out of friendship, not curiosity. Ticket prices keep people like me—*and* me, in fact—away from most theatre.

Of course, this is no thing new. Julius Novick is an esteemed American critic (and also a George Jean Nathan Award winner). We were recently talking about theatre in the "post-TV" era of the last sixty years or so, and he said: "Ordinary middle-class people became less and less likely to become regular theatergoers. At this point, except for press tickets and TDF [the

Theatre Development Fund, which offers discount Broadway tickets], I wouldn't be a regular theatergoer." That's a shame and that's a problem.

At this moment in the United States, we are faced with a theatre that most deem too costly and largely irrelevant.

In my estimation, the theatre community has not had an overwhelming response to American politics of this new century, especially in light of the war in Iraq. The thirst for knowledge about the Middle East, however, has grown since 9/11 and plays with that topic are getting more attention as a result.

The New York Theatre Workshop created quite a stir last year when they pulled the play "My Name is Rachel Corrie" earlier this year for fear of a pro-Israeli backlash. It is currently playing at the Minetta Lane Theatre (and getting poor reviews).

Of course, the subject is an American activist in Palestine, but it was brought to the stage by the *British* duo Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner. Such was the case with "Stuff Happens" by British playwright David Hare.

The 2005 Lincoln Center Festival produced Arianne Mnouchkine's "The Last Caravan" about refugees from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. This two-hour, six-part show captivated American audiences eager to hear this story at this point in American history. But where are the American *playwrights*?

Tony Kushner's "Homebody/Kabul" talks about modern life in Afghanistan, yet the Pulitzer Prize winner penned the story before the events of 9/11. Not revised after that date, the show was mounted in New York in December 2001, again in 2004, and is now produced regularly throughout the U.S. "I assumed that people watching the play would really not know what the Northern Alliance was, or care particularly," Kushner told America's National Public Radio on December 3, 2001. "I don't think I have to worry about that any more."

"Nine Parts of Desire" by Heather Raffo, and American actress of Iraqi descent, was a popular show that opened in October 2004. It sold out for nine months at Manhattan Ensemble Theatre and Raffo continues to tour the production throughout the U.S.

In addition to keeping up with current events, theatre must also try to compete with other forms of media and entertainment. Unfortunately, much of what I have seen recently has been overstuffed—trying desperately to juggle new media but just making a mess instead.

The Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival just closed Carl Hancock Rux's multimedia production, "Mycenean." The play was based on Rux's own novel, *Asphalt*; his epic poem "Mycenean"; Racine's version of the Hippolytus myth; and 20th-century dream theory. The production itself incorporated poetry, film, movement, music, and song. To say it was overreaching would be an understatement.

Meanwhile, the famous Wooster Group has been using multimedia for decades and still does so gloriously. Their 1998 production of "House/Lights," which I saw remounted last year, was stunning, and I'm looking forward to their new interpretation of "Hamlet" in February. (Of course, those of you in Paris or Berlin will see it first later this year.) The Wooster Group calls their version of the world's most famous play an "archaeological excursion into America's cultural past, looking for archetypes that shadow forth our identity." This will take place at St. Ann's Warehouse, a hip performance space in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Currently onstage at that venue is "Hell House" by the American company with a French name: Les Freres Corbusier. The pageant-style production is based on actual "hell houses," which are staged by evangelical Christians in the Midwest and Southern United States.

Part haunted house, part morality play, the idea is to scare congregants away from Satan and back toward religion. A similar show was produced in Los Angeles in 2004 called "Hollywood Hell House" and starred some B-list celebrities and Bill Maher, the controversial host of the now-defunct talk show *Politically Incorrect* and the current host of his own HBO show, played Satan. Les Freres Corbusier created their own version to show the east coast a little of what is going in other parts of the United States.

After the 2004 election, exit polls revealed that many Americans who voted for Bush did so because of his stance on "moral values." This has since famously divided the country between red and blue states—so named for the electoral map with red representing Republican and blue, democratic.

Irony is a huge part of life for young New Yorkers and it shows in their theatre. Our defense to all of the over-advertising and deception in our culture is to mock it entirely. This is seen through the popularity of television shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and "joke" newspapers like *The Onion.*

Last year, the Brick Theatre Company in Brooklyn held the Moral Values Festival. The plays included "Dear Dubya: Patriotic Love Letters to WhiteHouse.Org"; Mikki Baloy's "Eleven" about the lives of 11 people in post-9/11 New York; and "The Fourth Reich" by Danny Bowes. On the topic of criticism, another play on the Moral Values roster was Chris Harcum's "Mahamudra (or Postconsumer Waste Recycled Paper)," in which a "loathsome theatre critic on a major power trip learns to atone for his misdeeds in front of a live audience."

This summer, the Brick launched yet another ironic lineup of shows called the $ellout Festival. Their marketing material read:

"Are you tired of art? Bored of theatre? Revolted by modern aesthetics? Are you a jaded, cynical New Yorker, ready to turn your back on the slow death rattle of this city's once great cultural legacy? So are we, my friend. So are we.
That's why, this summer, we at The Brick are going commercial and selling out our integrity as fast as we can."

One of their productions brought the sprawling world of the Internet into a tiny black box theatre. "True Life Story of [Your Name Here]" a play sold on eBbay. The auction was for an opportunity to have the Ensemble Studio Theatre use the winner's life story to make a play. The highest bidder was Tom Richford, who paid $521 for the privilege. The final production was not earth-shattering, but in this era of reality TV and instant gratification, the idea was a step in the right direction.

So what about the critics?

Michael Feingold has been the chief theatre critic at the *Village Voice* for 32 years and can offer insightful analysis into the changing role of the American critic. I recently asked him if

he thought that criticism has changed in this new millennium. He replied, "The Bush era has so discouraged criticism on all fronts and the mass media so defuse it with multiple voices that nobody is quite sure what the idea of theater or the idea of criticism means anymore."

I cannot tell you what criticism was like in the past. I can tell you my experience in New York over the last few years. My reviews for *The New York Times* run at 500 words. My reviews for the very popular magazine *Time Out New York* run 160 to 250 words. *Back Stage* allows me up to 300 words. (Suffice it to say that the pay I receive per-review couldn't buy me a good seat at a Broadway show.)

So why am I—a new critic—doing this? Free tickets? Absolutely. But I also care about the art form. I believe that it is important to champion great new art and continue to raise the bar in this vast and overcrowded marketplace.

I wish I could tell you about a new theatre magazine or section of a newspaper devoted to theatre, but I don't know of any. Still, there are reviews in *Time, Newsweek, The New Yorker*, and other major national publications. And to theatres, critics still matter. Especially people like Ben Brantley, the chief critic at *The New York Times.*

This was hilariously evident in Bina Sharif's recent play "Think of Ben Brantley and Write a Happy Play." The Pakistani playwright's comedy had its New York premiere last month the Theatre for the New City. The characters Mona and Robert are unhappily married, largely because of Mona's tragic plays about Iraq that the critics deride. Her husband loves reading Ben Brantley's reviews and advises Mona to write an entertaining, commercially successful play by thinking of the critic.

Almost every theatre I go to has a huge poster of a good review and a press packet full of the same—if applicable. Theaters notoriously pull quotes from reviews to sell their shows and emblazon them on the sides of buses, on billboards, websites and everything in between. So, in the industry, the critic's voice still matters. It just might matter more to the box office than to the creators.

While the public might not know a critic's name, like the character Robert, there's still a buzz of "the critics loved this show. They panned that one." People do listen to us. I think it helps

that we are encouraged to write conversationally and not like professors, with all due respect to professors. This, or course, is a double-edged sword. And now, I will confess something to this Congress of world theatre critics: I hate *The New Yorker* magazine. I don't have the patience, time or energy to sit down and read a tome. I would much rather pick up *Time Out* and read a pithy review in 250 words.

I'm sure some of you are revolted by my Generation Y-ness. You're thinking that MTV has clouded my mind, whittled away my attention span, robbed me of any substantive culture. Perhaps. But the truth is the culture and the era I live in demands it. I don't own a television. I go to the opera and the ballet and I sometimes speak at theatre critics conferences. If anything can speak to new theatre and new criticism, I hope I can. I *am* here, after all.

Kerri Allen is an award-winning writer and critic. The New York Times Institute for Journalists awarded her a certificate of achievement for her work as a 2006 fellow to the Eugene O'Neill Critics Institute. In 2005, she was selected as one of three arts journalists to be a Theatre Communications Group fellow and participant in the National Theatre Criticism/Affiliated Writers Program. The New Jersey Press Association's collegiate division awarded Ms. Allen First Place in Arts & Entertainment/Critical Writing for her reviews of the Broadway musicals "Aida" and "Cabaret" (2001).

She is a member of the American Society of Journalists and Authors, the Freelancers Union and is Vice Chair of the international committee of the American Theatre Critics Association. Ms. Allen has been an invited speaker at event hosted by Stadttheatre New York (2006), the Latin American Theatre Today conference at the University of Connecticut (2005) and Fifth Annual Symposium on Latin American Theatre at University of Kansas (2003). She was a member of the nominating committee for the 2007 Kyoto Prize and is both a nominating and voting member for the Regional Theater Tony Award. Ms. Allen studied at the Universidad Internacional in Mexico and graduated magna cum laude from Rutgers University. She lives in New York City. More at www.kerriallen.com.