

# A Guest in the Prompter's Box

**Dan Rebellato**, playwright, academic and Trustee, reflects on the function of theatre criticism and the obligations of the press.

The name of this magazine is *Theatre Record*. I don't know but I suppose the title was chosen to convey that, by gathering and preserving reviews of theatre productions, we were recording them for posterity. A theatre review is almost as fleeting as a theatre show – an ephemerality in pursuit of an ephemerality – yet they capture (imperfectly, partially) the impressions left on the senses by an act of theatre. In the short term, they are a valuable piece of marketing; in the longer term, they give us, the almost infinitely larger magnitude, access to those shows we didn't or couldn't see. The Trustees of *Theatre Record* have sometimes debated whether we should reproduce the star ratings in our pages along with the reviews and we have always decided against it, on the basis that the star rating is marketing, but the review is a small contribution to the future.

The latter is where the theatre review truly coincides with serious journalism. Newspapers don't print reviews because they fancy offering free advertisements to theatres; they publish reviews because it's part of being a newspaper of record, because part of the way you help people know about and understand and interpret the world around them is by informing them about what the culture is doing.

I've been reflecting on this because of the news that *The Guardian* is cutting Lyn Gardner's theatre blog: that is, they have cut the 150 blogs she writes each year and has done for nearly a decade. That's 130,000 words a year, the size of a hefty academic monograph. And not just any words: what has always characterised Lyn Gardner's blog is her attention to a wider range of theatre activity than any other reviewer in Britain. Lyn is tireless in travelling the country to write about a start-up theatre festival in Bristol, a performance installation in Bangor, a theatre conference in Birmingham. Her legendary appetite for the Edinburgh Festival is a durational, interactive piece of experimental physical theatre in its own right. As theatre blogger Megan Vaughan has pointed out, her tireless seeking out and championing of new work makes her a kind of personal shopper for theatre producers around the UK. Added to that, Lyn has used the space in the blog to address questions of diversity, representation, funding, politics and more.

The newspapers and the internet have been working out their relationship problems in public for most of this century. Early they embraced pretty fulsomely, newspapers putting much of their content freely on the web, hoping that online advertising would offset any loss to the print editions. But this has had a number of effects. First, there's an awful lot of internet and marketing budgets are being spread very thin, so advertising revenues are not what they were. Second, by going online, newspapers have yielded the privilege and prestige of print. They are now just one website among many. This in part explains the current malaise where propaganda websites like Breitbart, Westmonster, and InfoWars have so poisoned the well of journalism that millions of people can denounce serious responsible investigative reporting as "fake news". A level playing field is all very well but when you level the playing field between truth and falsehood, the field gets very muddy.

Which is why it is so disappointing that *The Guardian* has made this decision. They were pioneers of a genuinely integrated digital policy, using the possibilities of Web 2.0 to complement and extend the traditional idea of what a newspaper could be. Print criticism has been in retreat for a while now: word counts shrinking, critics sacked or replaced by hobbyists, regional coverage reduced or jettisoned, reviews becoming occasional or online-only. *The Guardian's* blog has been a vision of criticism as part of a broad conversation about theatre, a way for theatre makers and audiences to keep in touch with each other, for theatregoers to have their imaginations fired by visions of strange and exotic new ways of making theatre; sometimes it has seemed like the only way for a small-scale regional performance maker to flare up in the metropolitan consciousness.

And we're about to lose all that. *The Guardian* must have their financial reasons but I still suspect it may be a shortsighted decision. But it also points to a fundamental weakness of our theatre culture. It is, frankly, ridiculous that we should be worrying about Lyn Gardner losing her blog. In a healthy culture, we might regret a good and enthusiastic critic losing some work, but we would console ourselves by remembering all the great work everyone else does. But the situation we are in is that one newspaper cutting one strand of theatre coverage on its website feels like a devastating blow to theatre in the regions, to theatre festivals, to performance making, and to the quality of our public conversation about theatre. It's a sign of the perilous state of our print media, but also that our theatre culture needs a serious health check.

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**FRONT COVER:** Ben Turner and the cast of *The Kite Runner*, Matthew Spangler's adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's novel, at Wyndham's Theatre (*Robert Workman*).

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