



samag
Seminars for Arts Professionals

APRIL 2007 SEMINAR SUMMARY

CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Speakers: **Merran Doyle – Arts Publicist**
Marguerite Pepper – Independent Theatre Producer
Michael Reid – Art market analyst and art dealer

Chair: **Deborah Jones – Executive Editor, *The Australian***

Monday, 26 March, 2007 – Australia Council for the Arts: 372 Elizabeth St SURRY HILLS

By Frances Derricourt

The April SAMAG Seminar took an interesting turn, when a discussion on the role of the arts critic became a debate over whether the art critic was indeed even relevant in today's society. In a digital world, where audience members can turn critics in online chat groups and where blogs are covering the arts in a multitude of ways, it does seem outdated to continue to rely on a handful of voices from within the mainstream media.

The SAMAG committee began the evening by addressing a negative comment from a journalist that this seminar on criticism did not actually involve any critics. They responded by noting that Chairperson Deborah Jones was formally the arts editor of *The Australian* and continues to write about the arts, whilst Michael Reid is a well known writer and analyst on the visual arts in Australia. The other speakers provide equally valid perspectives on the role of art critics. On one scale is theatre publicist Merran Doyle, whose job depends on the existence of critics, and on the other is Marguerite Pepper, whose role as producer in independent theatre has forced her to think outside the square and break away from a reliance on the traditional theatre critic.

Marguerite begins the discussion by noting that during her research for this seminar, she found a lack of serious writing on the role of the critic in the current age. Whilst this may suggest the role of the critic is diminishing, we cannot ignore the fact that most mainstream media, as well as arts media, continue to employ an arts critic.

"When defining the role of a critic I think the most important thing to remember is that they are paid," says Michael. "So my definition of a critic is someone who gets paid by an accredited media organisation to professionally comment on a particular field or endeavour, regularly".

Marguerite has a more philosophical notion of a critic, placing them on par with a cultural commentator with social responsibilities. Quoting from an article by Welsh critic David Adams she says "criticism is a document, a record, an ideological tool, a search for meaning. It raises issues, and puts the art into a social context"



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When it comes to her definition of a critic, Deborah looks back to her criteria for employing critics at *The Australian*. "Their opinion needs to be based on a true grounding of knowledge or understanding of a certain area, but they should be able to remain neutral in their dislikes and likes. For instance, if someone hates contemporary dance they should still be able to review it neutrally by really trying to understand what the artist is trying to say in the context of that art form". In general she found that academics were the best people for the job because they have the knowledge base, they have time to review and they are removed from the industry.

If critics can be defined as experts, commentators or documenters, they are certainly not public relations machines. Over the years, Merran has become accustomed to the uneasy relationship between critics and publicists, particularly as she has to fight to get a critic to a show who can then turn around and write something absolutely terrible about it. She has, at times, been tempted to avoid these harsher voices in the theatre foyers, but has come to accept that it's just their job to give their honest opinion. "Apart from attracting an audience, the reviewer should give lucid and fair-minded analysis and evaluation, that's really their role, either encourage or discourage audiences", says Merran.

The panellists all agree that no matter how we view critics, they still remain vital to the artist. By just showing up to their show the critic can help provide a public record of their work. "A lot of smaller independent theatre companies might employ me specifically to get a reviewer to their show", says Merran. "For those which don't have a lot of money it's imperative they can get reviewed so that they can get more work."

Michael adds that critics have a big responsibility to be honest to artists. "Critics are actually the only people who are actually truthful to them. Someone has to do this and give them constructive criticism, and some of the best artists I know will use this criticism to find new directions or explore themselves."

But the question is, are the people we trust to be critics in Australia doing a good job? Can we rely on them to be honest to artists and also to inform the audience in an intelligent way?

Marguerite argues that critics in Australia are limited by the smaller scope of the arts world, and the lack of tradition of serious cultural criticism that exists in countries such as the UK. "In Europe there's a big critical mass, you can get most of the top writers to a show opening in London and critics there have had exposure to a lot more work. Also we don't have enough writers here - someone such as Jill Sykes has to review *Priscilla* one night, Gideon's chunky move a week later, and my new work at the same time. There is no one who could possibly do that and continue to write quality reviews."

A more worrying point brought up by the panel, is the close-knit nature of the Australian arts world. "Because in Australia we have such a small environment, criticism can be very measured, can almost be false" says Deborah. "You don't want to be crushing but you have to be honest. Critics in this country feel the responsibility very heavily, whereas in London the British press can be extremely harsh in their judgements".



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Merran adds that because of the close relationships within the arts community, many reviewers are influenced by their friendships with the actor, producer or director of a certain show. This is particularly true in a smaller hub such as Brisbane, where a music academic might be employed to review a new piece by a composer who most likely works in the same department as them.

It seems the panel generally feels that arts reviewing in Australia is not of the highest quality. Whilst money is being poured into the sports pages of newspapers, there still only exists a handful of well-known art critics who tend to stick around way past their use-by date. On the smaller local papers, people tend to land with the arts round once they've done the court round, and so do not have a specialised knowledge in this area.

More to the point, is anyone actually taking notice of reviewers any more? Artists may be desperate to get them to their shows, but in the end it seems that positive word-of-mouth or a huge marketing budget can be the ultimate factor in audience numbers. Merran mentions that the musical version of *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* received quite negative reviews across the media, yet still managed to retain large audience because of a clever and comprehensive marketing campaign.

Marguerite feels strongly that all of these points add up to one clear argument – those in the arts community today should not be relying on the single voice of a mainstream arts critic to either record their work or judge its worth. Instead we should be making use of the large range of media available to us in the digital age as well as engaging journalists in interesting ways. In Europe there has been a tradition of inviting writers to come and watch the creative process of a play or film, in order to understand some of the artistic directions. People in Australia have been wary of this but it's a great way to encourage high quality editorial coverage of a work, from a writer who really takes an interest.

There are also some really interesting publications such as *Real Time* publishing quality arts criticism, which should be funded to receive wider distribution. If our mainstream media continues to funnel its money into the sports pages, we need to ensure the voices of alternative arts writers are being heard.

The panel concludes its discussion with a plea to the SAMAG audience to break away from focussing on getting that *Sydney Morning Herald* critic to your show. Invite people from different media forms, thinking of interesting marketing projects and perhaps change your invitees on opening night to those who may not normally even attend a theatre performance. And if you're a budding art critic yourself, Michael adds that it's important to just start writing and getting your work out there, as the new information highway is craving new opinions and ideas and you might be just the person they're after.