
Writing Theatre Reviews

Theatre reviews are written to convey your insights into the artistic merits of a play or production. Before attending a dramatic performance, there are a number of questions you might consider.

Please remember to provide specific examples to back up your claims. In order to write a good review, it is important to stay focused.

SUMMARIZING THE PLAY

Readers want to be able to “visualize” the play that you are reviewing, so you need to provide a brief summary based on the focus of your review. That is, you need to include the details that are pertinent to YOUR review, not every detail. If you want to comment on how an actor represented a character, for example, then make sure you tell us about that character and his or her role in the play. But we don’t need to know about every character. The length of this summary will depend on your assignment (if you have one), but a good rule of thumb is that the summary should represent no more than 1/4 to 1/3 of the text of your review.

For a general summary, here are some questions to get your started. You will not need to answer all of them.

What is the play called? Who is the director? Where is it playing? For how long? Who wrote it? Who are the main actors, the supporting actors? Who are the main characters of the play?

Most of this technical and biographical information is included in the playbill, so make sure you keep it if you’re planning on writing a review.

What is the play about? What are the main ideas it presents, the issues it confronts?

Is the play typical of one particular genre? Is it a comedy? A tragedy? A combination of both? Does it fall under the category of “theatre of the absurd” or “postmodern” or “First Nations’ Theatre”? Does it make a mockery of the genre or deconstruct it? In answering these questions, you are also asking whether the play undermines the viewer’s assumptions, what the viewer might be expecting from the play, and how that is fulfilled or challenged.

ANALYZING THE PLAY

To write a good review of anything, you must be able to take a critical position. This can be positive, negative, “apparently indifferent,” or some combination of these, but where you stand on certain issues should be clear to your reader. You might consider what’s missing, what’s worth seeing, what it is you value the most.

There are a few different approaches to critically evaluating a theatrical performance. The following will give you some ideas of where to start:

What effect does the play/performance have on the viewer?

Is it compelling? Difficult? Overwhelming? Dry? Humorous? Cryptic? Stale? Dark? Invigorating? Gossipy? Mechanical? Predictable? Sophisticated? Devastating? Too civilized? Too abrasive? Too subtle? Does it “throw a lot at you”? “Violate your senses?” “Invoke a furious response”?

If the play was based on a novel or film, how does it compare?

Was the script written by the author of the original text? Is the script faithful to the original text? Has the play been made into a film. How does the screenplay compare to the stage production?

If you have read the script before you attend the performance, it might be a good idea to analyze the performance in light of the written text. Does the performance realize its potential? Do the actors fit the description of the characters you had in mind?

How does the play fit into the overall portfolio of an actor, director or producer?

How does this performance compare to other work you’ve seen by this person? Is it similar or different from the kind of work they do in general?

How does the form of the play contribute to its success/failure?

If you’ve got the necessary background, you might want ask yourself how the blocking, lighting, stage design, and costumes influence the outcome of the play. You might also analyze an actor’s use of gesture and voice. Or you might consider whether the script is complicated or complemented through the use of special effects, flashbacks, recurring image motifs, lights, staging, or other visual schema?

If you choose to analyze the formal qualities of a production, you must take your audience into account. Will they be familiar with the terminology you are using? If not, it will be important to provide some definitions or use more general language.

USING REFERENCES IN THEATRE REVIEWS

You can often gain useful information from other reviews, newspaper articles, academic essays in journals, and interviews. Though a review is ultimately your opinion of a piece of theatre (based on the criteria you have used to evaluate it), your opinion will often be more convincing to readers if you know of other critics who have shared similar opinions.

Remember that although professional reviewers don’t provide a Works Cited list, your instructor will expect you to document your sources properly.

MORE INFORMATION

“How to Write a Theatre Review” from amdram, an amateur theatre network:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151107083759/http://amdram.co.uk/articles/how-to-write-a-theatre-review/>

Exeunt Magazine specializes in theatre criticism:

<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/>

The Guardian publishes a number of theatre reviews on their website, and updates frequently: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatre+tone/reviews>