The Art of Arts Reviewing

Anyone who enjoys movies, theater, music or dance can learn to be an arts writer. All you need are strong opinions — and a fiction writer's flair.

BY JUDITH BRODHURST

You're running late, and halfway out the door when the phone rings.

"Aretha Franklin is willing to do two interviews — only two," says the publicist for the summer concert series. "Do you want one of them?" The Queen of Soul hasn't given an interview in years. An image of a four-color cover and layout flashes through your mind. "Absolutely," you say.

"What a glamorous job you have," gushes your roommate. You barely hear the comment as you dive into the lapful of R&B history and reference books you grabbed to cram for the impromptu interview.

After the interview, you do more digging to flesh out your story. The research is no more glamorous than the pay. But you know that if you simply spout off your self-indulgent opinions week after week, you'll lose the gig — guaranteed. The readers, the artists and the editors have a right to an informed opinion, not just an opinion based on the few notes you scribble in the dark during a performance.

The pay is paltry — typically $30-$50 a review. Longer features, which require research and interviews, pay $50-$150, depending on the publication's circulation. Unless you're writing for Rolling Stone, don't expect better than $10-$25 a word, even for national magazines.

To save your pride, tally what you would have paid for the tickets or CDs, and never count the hours it really took to do the story beyond the actual writing. Otherwise, when you figure out what you're making per hour, you'll turn in your press pass as soon as the glitter wears off. Those of us who stick with reviewing tend to be evangelical about the art forms we write about, and also find much that's rewarding in the writing itself.
SEVEN GOOD REASONS TO WRITE IN THE DARK

• Reviews are basically essays. By writing them, you can hone your essay skills, and get paid to do it.

• Interviews are interviews. The skills and intuition you develop while interviewing celebrities will prove valuable in any interview. If you can write a profile of an artist, you can write a profile of an executive.

• It's easy to branch out to general features or get assignments for more complex arts features. No cussed query letters, just a quick phone call to an editor who already knows you.

• If you can arrange to be a daily or weekly newspaper's arts-section stringer (part-time writer on payroll, but paid by the story), you'll write almost every week. That alone will improve your writing.

• You learn to use newsroom computers or to transmit copy by modem. You prove to editors that you can consistently file clean copy on short deadlines. That puts you on their first-call list.

• If your long-term goal is to crack the major magazine markets, freelancing for local and regional arts sections will provide you with valuable clips.

• But the real lure for writers, fiction or nonfiction, is that writing about the performing arts affords you much creative latitude. You can use fiction techniques and spice your writing with color and slang, and get away with it. Arts writers are expected to be colorful and individualistic.

YOUR TICKET TO REGULAR ASSIGNMENTS

You don't have to be a playwright or a dancer or a musician to write about the arts. Artistic expertise can help, but many who have it sometimes get too technical for the general reader. Saying you have to be a musician to write about music is like saying you have to be a mechanic to drive a car. You do have to be crazy about music, and open to sharing your appreciation. That applies to all the arts.

If the job description still appeals to you, go after the gig. Submit samples of your writing, preferably published clips, to your local arts and entertainment editor. Mail them with a cover letter of two paragraphs, max. Say you'd like to interview so-and-so about his upcoming performance, or that you'd like to review such-and-such, happening two to four weeks from now. Tell the editor you'll call to discuss it or to schedule an appointment to introduce yourself.

Then call her within a week, before she misplaces what you sent, because she will. Suggest reviewing a local production, not a famous artist on tour. Staff writers haggle over who gets the primo assignments, and freelancers must pay their dues before they get a shot at the glamour events. (Still, you'll get them sooner than you might think.)

If your first approach doesn't work, go to the show, write the review, and send it to the editor anyway. Don't expect it to be published. If it is, fine, but your goal is to bolster your case and show the editor that you're serious.

An alternate tactic is to get on the mailing lists of local performing arts center publicists, clubs and concert producers to learn far in advance what stories will be of interest to the editor and her readers. Choose a performance you know something about, then make it your business to learn more. Now state your case to the editor, as described above, and offer to write your first review on spec. Most arts editors are always on the lookout for freelancers who can write and think at the same time.

12 TIPS FOR WRITING GOOD REVIEWS

There's one sure-fire formula for being a successful reviewer: Pithy and punchy stories make for loyal readers, which make for loyal editors and a regular byline. Keep these tips in mind:

• Keep your ego out of it. There's invariably a way to get your point across without writing I. In drawing attention to yourself, you draw it away from the focus of the review, which is the performance, not your opinion.

• The latest production of the University Players is a shocker has much more force than any version of I was shocked.

• Or use the universal you and we:

Days later, the sights and sounds and feelings that the Obie-winning play Dutchman provokes are still strong. You can't keep from turning the story over and over in your mind, and talking about it, over and over, even with people who weren't there.

• Don't start with a synopsis of a play or film. That reads like a high-school book report. It's rarely necessary to include a detailed synopsis at all.

Look again at the two examples above. Both were leads for reviews of plays. Somewhere early in the story, it's good to give the gist of your review. Something like, "City Stickers is about the angst of three middle-aged, yuppie men. It's also about male bonding and men's liberation and other clichés, all told in the context of a cattle drive for tourists."

There's only one rule: Never give away the ending.

• Back up your main points with vivid examples. Plug in revealing bits of dialogue, but no more than a sentence or two that illustrate the essence of the performance:

Bonne Raitt's music is honest. And she convinces you that she and her music are truly the same. When she says, "Take care of each other. Do the right thing," you believe she means it and tries to live it.

Paint word pictures. This is easy to do with dance and theater, but can work for music, too:

Friday night was a bust. Saturday, it rained for the only time, really, in the 32-year history of the Monterey Jazz Festival. Sunday, Take Six redeemed the whole thing.

Take Six is in the redemption business. In the past year they've won four of gospel music's Dove awards and two Grammies. From the second song on, they had 7,000 people up on their feet and standing on chairs, screaming themselves hoarse.

• Master metaphors. When Whitney Balliett, jazz critic for The New Yorker, unfurls one, you feel as if you were in the audience. There's nothing about 6/8 time in his writing. He excels at conjuring images from everyday language, like "Sheldon's soft trumpet had a kind of evening, piper-in-the-meadow quality."

Metaphors and similes can also trigger instant understanding and evoke a visceral reaction: "Despite reports of a comeback, in the context of 1989 rather than 1969, Roberta Flack's trademark 'soft soul' is as appealing as warm ice cream."

• Use action verbs. You're reviewing a performance, not reporting on a meeting. Choose colorful, personal words. Write with feeling, not just analytically. (This is most important in writing about music, where emotion is the main element and everything else is incidental.)

For reasons obscure, Lula carries apples and toilet paper in her oversized purse. When she bites into the apple, you see Eve; yet you know she stare straight into the eyes of the snake. And you shudder.
K
eep these books within reach, and you'll avoid panicky calls to the library when you're on deadline:

**MUSIC**

*New Rolling Stone Record Guide* (which isn't so new), edited by Dave Marsh and John Swenson (Random House)


*Jazz on Record: A History*, by Brian Priestly (Billboard)

*The Encyclopedia of Jazz in the '70s*, by Leonard Feather and Ira Gitler (Da Capo)

*Blues Who's Who*, by Sheldon Harris (Da Capo)

*The Da Capo Guide to Contemporary African Music*, by Ronnie Graham (Da Capo)

*Beats of the Heart: Popular Music of the World*, by Jeremy Marre and Hannah Charlton (Pantheon)


*Shaw on Music*, by George Bernard Shaw (Doubleday Anchor)

*The Joy of Music* by Leonard Bernstein (Simon & Schuster)

*What to Listen for in Music*, by Aaron Copeland (Mentor)

**Dance**

*The Complete Guide to Modern Dance*, by Don McDonagh (Doubleday)

*The Dance in America*, by Walter Terry (HarperCollins)

*Time and the Dancing Image*, by Deborah Jowitt (University of California Press)

*How to Enjoy Ballet*, by Don McDonagh (Doubleday)

**Theater**


**Writing Reviews**

*Reviewing the Arts*, by Campbell B. Titchener (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)

*Writing Opinion Reviews*, by William L. Rivers (Iowa State University Press)

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*Don't waffle.* State your case with confidence and conviction. If you're the only person in the house who hated the thing, say so. But state it unequivocally, and say why.

George Bernard Shaw, who was as well-known as a music and theater critic as he was as a playwright, summed it up in 1890 when he wrote, "Criticism written without personal feeling is not worth reading. It is the capacity for making good or bad art a personal matter that makes a man a critic."

Even if the art is awful, however, don't just criticize the performers. Put them on the back for something, sincerely. Cut a community theater a little slack, because it lays no claim to national stature. On the other hand, insist that those who do tout themselves as first-rate live up to their reputations.

*Put it in historical context.* Give your readers the backgrounds of the performers and the piece, and explain how that information relates to the present production. If the director is the same one who staged the hit musical at the community college last summer, that's relevant. So is how this play compares with the quality of his previous one. Unless it's a premiere, review the performance, not the play.

To do this well, you must do more than read a bio or press kit. You must experience the art as often as possible—preferably live, but study recordings and videos, too. You also must study related art forms and know something about the art's history. You can fudge to some extent if you keep a book like Bernard Grun's *Timetables of History* within easy reach. It lays out what was happening from BC through 1978 in realms from politics to science and technology, including all art forms. It's all in chart format, easy to skim.

*Study related works and artists so you'll have a valid basis for comparison.* Learn about the work of the artists' contemporaries and forebears. If you're writing about jazz, you need to know something about blues, pop and rock, maybe a bit about European classical music and African music, too. You need to know who each band leader's musical influences are, and from what tradition the group has evolved.

*Make sure you understand the social, political, and artistic perspectives that affect the work.* This applies to plays, movies, dance and music. Art, good art, reflects and reacts to the world in which it's created.

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Art is a continuum. You'll find similar things happening at similar times in the visual, performing and literary arts. Read reviews by the best critics, no matter what their subject matter. Attend all the live performances you can, good and bad, in all disciplines. They're all connected, and it's part of your job to help the reader see those connections.

- Try to understand the artists' intention. Then assess how well they achieved it and whether it was worth achieving. This is probably the essence of the review. It's this interpretation that often impresses readers, making you sound oh-so-perceptive and authoritative if you don't overplay it. But there's no real mystery to uncovering this key facet. Here's the secret: Ask them.

The easiest way to discern that intention is to question the artist about it directly, preferably after the show. If you ask a choreographer to explain the dance before you see it, you have an advantage others in the audience do not. Your interpretation is bound to be skewed, even confusing, unless you form your impressions first.

Always, always bear in mind two things:

It takes courage, creativity and a lot of idealism for artists to get up on a stage. What you write in the dark can have a great influence on their careers in the cold light of day. Be honest, but be kind.

The other thing to remember is this: What you write is merely your opinion, not the judgment of God. You may be the only one who takes it seriously at all. And that's as it should be.

Break a leg.

Judith Broadhurst was a newspaper jazz columnist for seven years and an arts and entertainment stringer for four years. In her "previous lives" she flew for Delta Air Lines, booked jazz musicians on tours, and produced and promoted concerts and other events. Her articles have appeared in Working Woman, Home Office Computing and other national magazines. She now publishes the Freelance Success Newsletters.