



Culture & Civilization

A Critic Takes a Bow

On writing an opera after a career critiquing the creative work of others

By TERRY TEACHOUT

ON JULY 25, I expect to step from the wings of an opera house perched atop a 6,900-foot-high mesa in New Mexico, walk to center stage, look out at two thousand people, and take the first curtain call of my adult life. The occasion will be the

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premiere of *The Letter*, an opera by the composer Paul Moravec that is based on W. Somerset Maugham's 1927 play of the same name and for which I have written the words. If all goes well, the members of the audience will be cheering by the time Paul and I appear on stage. If not, my career as an opera librettist will come to an abrupt and inglorious end.

Nobody plans on becoming a librettist, least of all a middle-aged drama critic. When the Santa Fe Opera commissioned *The Letter* in November 2006, I'd never written a stage work of any kind (except for an unperformed play that rests at the bottom of a desk drawer, where it belongs). Instead, I had spent my career practicing a form of literary endeavor that most artists hold in contempt.

To be sure, it is not unusual for artists to write criticism. Indeed, much of the best criticism

ever written has been the work of accomplished practitioners of the art forms about which they write. Sometimes, as in the cases of George Bernard Shaw and François Truffaut, criticism is a way station to a full-time career as a working artist. Less often, an artist may write criticism on the side throughout his life. Unable to make a living as a composer, Hector Berlioz paid the rent by writing brilliantly witty feuilletons about the music scene in Paris; more recently, Harold Clurman, who directed the premieres of such important plays as Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* and William Inge's *Bus Stop*, doubled as a drama critic of similar distinction, writing for the *New Republic* and the *Nation* from 1948 until his death in 1980.

It is, however, far less common (if by no means unprecedented) for a working critic to change hats in the middle of life and take part in

the creation of a work of art. Nor did I ever expect to do so. I knew from an early age that I lacked the gift of creativity—the ability to make something out of nothing—and so I chose instead to become a professional appreciator of other people's creations. I think I'm pretty good at it, but I confess I'd rather have been a pretty good painter.

What, then, have I learned from the experience of collaborating with a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer on a work that was commissioned by one of America's leading opera companies? And how has my decision to switch professional sides and become an artist—albeit temporarily—affected my work as a critic?

IN THE WORDS of Addison DeWitt of *All About Eve*, that best known and least loved of fictional critics:

My native habitat is the theater.
In it I toil not, neither do I spin.
I am a critic and commentator.
I am essential to the theater—as
ants are to a picnic, as the boll
weevil to a cotton field.

Joseph Mankiewicz, the writer and director who put those waspish words in DeWitt's mouth, was stretching the truth a bit. Great critics have done great good in the world of art. But they do not "spin"—the word, in this case, meaning not the casting of a political decision in the best possible light but rather the making of thread on a wheel. And therein lies the crucial difference.

Needless to say, it is possible for a critic to write well about an art form of which he has little or no practical knowledge. But any critic who has hands-on experience in the making of art cannot help but acquire a profound respect for what Wilfrid Sheed has called "the

simple miracle of getting the curtain up every night," and this respect is bound to color the way that he writes. Conversely, when a critic has no personal experience of the problems, both psychological and practical, that stand in the way of getting the curtain up, he may err on the side of an unrealistic perfectionism, and his reviews will be sterile and uncomprehending as a result.

It happens that I spent many years working as a professional musician before I became a professional writer, and this fact helped to shape the point of view that I later brought to my work as a critic. I view the performing arts with a practical eye, and I also identify with performers and their problems to a degree that I suspect to be uncommon among certain of my critical brethren. I tend to side with the performers about whom I write, and whenever a show that I'm reviewing turns out to be unsatisfactory, I try to understand and explain what went wrong rather than simply dismissing the results as not up to par.

This point of view, which is sympathetic in the truest sense of the word, is characteristic of what might be called "practitioner criticism." A case in point is Clurman's 1948 review of the original production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Though Clurman saw at once that Tennessee Williams' play ranked "very high among the creative contributions of the American theatre since 1920," he was the only New York critic who also saw that Elia Kazan's staging suffered from "a lack of balance and perspective" arising from Marlon Brando's performance as Stanley Kowalski:

Brando's quality is one of acute sensitivity. None of the brutishness of his part is native to him. . . . When he beats his wife or

throws the radio out the window there is, aside from the ugliness of these acts, an element of agony that falsifies their color in relation to their meaning in the play: they take on an almost Dostoyevskian aspect.

That kind of sharp-eyed analytical insight comes naturally to an experienced theatrical practitioner, but not to a critic who sees theater solely from the perspective of his aisle seat and knows little of the daunting realities of getting a play on stage.

TO SOME extent—perhaps even a considerable one—my experience playing music in front of audiences made it easier for me to think my way into the related problems of theatrical performance. Moreover, my time as the drama critic of the *Wall Street Journal* has taught me many things of which I was able to make use in writing *The Letter*.

Having spent the past six years watching two or three plays each week, some good and some bad, I've necessarily learned a great deal about what works on stage. This is one of the reasons why Paul Moravec and I decided that the dramaturgy of our first opera would be firmly rooted in common theatrical practice, so much so that *The Letter* is based on a "well-made" melodrama that not only had successful runs on the London and New York stages but also was subsequently turned into an equally successful Hollywood film.


In the end, though, there is no substitute for actually writing and producing a stage work, just as no amount of time spent in a flight simulator can fully prepare a young pilot for the experience of flying solo. Theater is an empirical art form: the success of a play is measured by its ability to seize and hold

the attention of an audience, and there are no all-purpose rules for bringing off this feat. While Paul and I felt reasonably confident of our ability to write an opera that “worked,” it was not until we rehearsed a workshop production of the first six scenes of *The Letter* and saw them performed in front of two live audiences that we were able to gauge the opera’s effectiveness.

Putting *The Letter* to the test of actual performance taught me more about the practical aspects of theater than anything that I had done up to that time. Just as important, it helped me to understand what a performer experiences each time he goes on stage. The resentment with which most performers view most critics is rooted in the fact that the latter are thought to play it safe: they write about other people’s art instead of making their own and offering it up for judgment. This is not really true, since critics often write books of their own and receive their own fair share of bad reviews. But a bad review can be left unread. A performer, on the other hand, need not read his reviews, but he cannot avoid his audiences, and every time he goes before them, he learns what they think of him in the most direct and unsparing way that mankind has yet devised. Either they clap or they don’t, and sometimes they boo.

A critic who has never gone before a paying audience cannot understand other than in the most general way what the playwright Moss Hart meant when he wrote this passage from *Act One*, his 1959 memoir:

Bitter words have been written about the first-night audience, but the fact remains that there is no audience ever again like it—no audience as keen, as alive, as exciting and as overwhelmingly satisfactory as a first-night audience taking a

 The singer
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play to its heart. It can unfurl the tricolor of its acclamation and make flags seem to wave from every box; just as in reverse its dissent can seem to dangle the Jolly Roger from the center chandelier.

I, on the other hand, found out exactly what Hart meant when I saw the first part of *The Letter* performed before an invited audience. Yes, the people who came to see it were disposed to like what they saw, but had they been bored, Paul and I would have known at once. No audience, however friendly its individual members may be, can convincingly simulate collective interest in an uninteresting performance. The cabaret singer Wesla Whitfield once described to me the experience of singing in the Oak Room of New York’s Algonquin Hotel. “I know what works and what doesn’t work,” she said. “When they’re bored, you can hear them scrunching up their toes in their

shoes.” I will never forget what it feels like to listen for that sound.

I MENTIONED that I had made a conscious decision to become a “professional appreciator” rather than a creative artist. The phrase, ironically enough, is not mine. It comes from the screenplay of *High Fidelity*, a movie about a strongly opinionated pop-music fan who decides at film’s end to produce a record by a group of young musicians whom he admires. “You’re making something,” his girlfriend tells him approvingly. “You—the critic, the professional appreciator—put something new into the world.”

That I have helped to put a new opera into the world is unlikely enough. It is not something that I ever saw myself doing, least of all in the middle of life, and I am more than a little bit surprised to have found within myself the courage to try my hand at the making of art. Yet it will be even more surprising when I follow the cast of *The Letter* onto the stage of the Crosby Theater later this month and find out at last what the opening-night audience thinks of what Paul Moravec and I have wrought.

Is this hard-won knowledge going to improve my writing about the theater? The practical lessons that I have already learned from writing an opera libretto are likely to stay with me for a very long time, and I expect to learn even more about what the playwright Alan Ayckbourn has called “the crafty art of playmaking” as I watch *The Letter* take shape in Santa Fe later this month.

Above all, though, I will learn how it feels to go in front of an audience and solicit its approval, and I may well find out what it feels like not to get it. Either way, I will surely come home a wiser man, and, I hope, a better critic. 🍷