

7

THEATRE CRITICISM: ANALYSING AND EVALUATING PERFORMANCES

WHY STUDY REVIEW WRITING?

In this chapter you will focus on writing a review of a performance. You have already begun to develop skills as a critical thinker about performance through your reflection on your own performance work and the performance work of others. When you review a performance and make evaluations about its strengths and weaknesses, you are challenging, confirming and clarifying your understanding and appreciation of performance. You are also developing your skills as a communicator of ideas and opinions about drama and theatre. This knowledge and understanding can then be applied to improve your own performance work.

This chapter is divided into the following units:

- 7.1 Steps in reviewing a live performance
- 7.2 Evaluating the components of a live performance
- 7.3 Written task: review of a performance

OUTCOMES

In this chapter you will:

- identify aspects of a performance for evaluation
- evaluate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a performance
- appreciate how the elements of a production work together in a performance
- incorporate examples from a performance to support judgements
- select and incorporate appropriate language to discuss ideas
- use digital technology to publish a review of a performance.





Performers in Melbourne
Theatre Company's *Queen
Lear* from 2012



HINT

It is a good idea to make notes about a performance either during the performance or shortly after you have seen it. This will help you to remember the points you want to include in your review.



HINT

Some theatre groups offer discussion time with the audience after the performance. If you are writing a review, this is an excellent opportunity to clarify any questions you may have about the performance.

7.1 Steps in reviewing a live performance

STEP 1 WATCH A PERFORMANCE

To write a review you need to choose a performance to attend. Performances to see could include:

- a local school or community production
- a visiting performer or theatre group
- your own school production
- a professional theatre production.

STEP 2 NOTE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND CREATE QUESTIONS

After watching a performance, you will have quite a strong sense of whether or not it was effective. This is usually reinforced through your feelings of whether or not you were engaged, moved, excited or disinterested in the performance. Sometimes, starting your review by using a rating scale can help you to determine your overall initial impression. You can then be more specific about where the strengths and weaknesses are. For example, you may give a performance a rating of 7 out of 10. You then need to explain why you could not give the performance a rating of 10 out of 10. It might have been the acting, the overall flow of the performance, the script and/or the use of sound and lighting. Create a list of questions that you have about any aspect of the production. Collaborate with others who have seen the performance. Discuss and respond to each other's questions and record your ideas. These questions will help to form the ideas for your paragraphs in your review

STEP 3 THINKING CRITICALLY AND MAKING JUDGEMENTS

Whatever your feelings about a performance, it is important to articulate your opinions clearly and to support your point of view with evidence. Writing a more detailed analysis of a performance gives you the opportunity to be specific about the particular elements of a performance and whether you thought they were strong or weak. The elements of a performance to consider in your review are:

- plot
- acting
- the manipulation of the elements of drama through direction and staging
- interpretation of the script (directorial concept)
- set design
- costume design
- lighting
- sound
- use and choice of performance space.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Imagine you are a theatre reviewer for an online magazine and answer the following questions:

- 1 What criteria would you use to determine the success of each element in a performance?
- 2 What criteria would you use to determine how well each element complemented the overall performance?
- 3 List and explain three qualities that you feel a good reviewer needs to have to be successful.

7.2

Evaluating the components of a live performance

STRUCTURING A REVIEW

When writing your review, use the PEEL structure for each paragraph: Point, Elaborate, Example and Link. Use the following points as a guideline for what you may include in your review.

Write an introduction

In your opening paragraph you need to include:

- the name of the play you are reviewing
- the name of the playwright and director
- your general overall impression of the play using language that helps the reader to understand that you will explain reasons for your impression in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

Summarise the plot and story; identify the performance style

Briefly summarise the plot and story. The skill in this section of your review lies in your ability to reduce the whole story to a brief, summarised version. This is usually only one paragraph in length, so do not include all the details—just the main events. The following example is for a linear narrative performed in a realistic style.

Plot – This is the actual action that happens on stage. For example:

The play is set in a Tasmanian coastal town over one evening. A couple, who lost one of their sons in a boating accident some years ago, are visited by a mysterious survivor of the boating accident. The survivor has important news about the death of the son.

Story – This involves more than what happens on stage. The story includes information about the characters and the situation that has occurred *outside* the actual action on stage, and is often revealed in the exposition. For example:

During the play, the couple reveal that their son was involved in gambling and crime. They also give information about the aftermath of the boating accident—the effect it had on the town and that confidential documents about the investigation into the accident went missing.



HINT

When writing your review, avoid using the first person 'I'. By using the third person, your review seems more objective. For example, instead of writing 'I thought the lighting helped to create the sombre mood', rephrase your sentence to read 'The lighting helped to create the sombre mood'.



Australian Stage
Stagewhispers
AussieTheatre.com
The Guardian – Stage +
Reviews
Kevin Jackson's Theatre
Diary



HINT

Some performances you see may not use a linear narrative or be performed in a realistic style. For these performances you should summarise the key moments of the performance rather than providing a summary of the plot.



HINT

The 'exposition' is the information that is given through character dialogue and action at the beginning of the play; it helps to tell the story.

Discuss the themes and issues, and direction

Outline the themes and issues that you feel were important in the play. The themes and issues create the focus that frames the action of the play to help create meaning for the audience. For example:

The couple learn to accept the death of their son through the visit of the boating accident survivor. The themes and issues of the play are guilt, accepting loss, injustice and confronting the past.

You should also discuss your impression of the directorial concept in your review. Comment on the director's interpretation of the play, and how the use of the elements of drama, the choice of dramatic form and the performance style help to communicate the play's themes and issues. For example:

This play is written in a realist style to effectively capture the experiences of grief and loss that the couple experience. The director and production designers create a sombre yet soothing environment through the use of set and lighting, and this symbolically conveys the couple's journey towards acceptance.

Evaluate the performers

Evaluate the success of the performers in playing their characters. You should be familiar with the sorts of areas to comment on because you have been assessed in these areas yourself. Choose two performers to evaluate and ask yourself the following questions for each performer:

- How well did they use body language to express their character? Give two examples.
- Were their movements and gestures appropriate for their character?
- How well did they use their voice to express their character and deliver lines? Was their use of voice appropriate for their character?
- Were there any key moments in the performance that were good examples of the performer's ability to portray character/role? Identify one or two key moments.
- Did they seem to blend with the action of the performance or did they stand out? Was this a positive or negative in the performance? Why?
- How focused did they seem during their performance?
- How convincing did the performer seem in their portrayal of their character?

Comment on the use of the elements of production

Discuss how effective you think the use of sound, lighting, set and costume were in the performance. You may also comment on how these production elements were used symbolically in the performance. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Were the costumes suitable for the characters? How did the choice of colours and designs convey time period and mood, and symbolise individual characters' purpose in the play or aspects of their personality?
- Was the set an effective use of the space? Why? Was the set easy for actors to manoeuvre around? In terms of colour and layout, did its design enhance the performance by creating symbolic meaning? How?
- Were the visual elements of costume and set unified in any way? Was contrast used for effect?
- How did the elements of production support the directorial concept?
- How did the lighting create points of focus and mood?

- Was special lighting used at any time for particular effect? How did this special lighting add to the success of the performance?
- Did the use of live or recorded sound enhance the performance? How?
- How did lighting and sound establish location and create atmosphere?

Sum up the overall success of the play

In the concluding paragraph, you need to do more than just repeat what you have already written. You need to look at all the elements you have previously analysed and come to a decision about the overall success of the production. Often it is helpful to read a copy of the script of the play you have seen. This helps you to understand and comment on the way in which the play has been interpreted by the director and performers.

Before you write the conclusion, consider the following:

- Refer to the rating out of 10 that you gave the performance. After consideration of each of the performance elements, do you still feel that this is a fair rating? Why or why not?
- Which aspects of the performance were strongest? Why?
- Which aspects of the performance were weakest? Why?
- Did any particular performance element seem to overshadow others? How?
- Can you make any suggestions for improvement?
- Create a title that sums up your impression of the play, as well as the comments and tone of your review. Your title needs to be engaging, so consider the use of puns or alliteration.



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PERFORMANCE TASK

7.3 Written task: review of a performance

The task

You are to write, edit and publish a review of a live performance. This may be as a printed hard copy, or you might create a blog post or website page. The review will explore and discuss the components of a performance. Your teacher will set the word length of the review.

Creating and making a review

Reviewing the steps listed in this chapter and reading the sample review will help your planning for this task.

In your review, include a discussion of:

- plot and story
- themes and issues
- actors' performances of their characters
- elements of production and how they contribute to dramatic meaning.

Remember to conclude your discussion with an overall opinion and evaluation.

Review checklist

You and your teacher will evaluate your work individually, using a list of criteria. These criteria relate to your achievement in this task. These criteria are listed on the evaluation sheet at the end of this chapter and will be used to evaluate your ability to:

- respond to each of the areas of a performance that need to be evaluated
- write a detailed and analytical response
- include examples from the production to illustrate and support your judgements
- write in an articulate and sophisticated manner appropriate for theatre criticism
- present ideas using a coherent and clear structure
- draft, edit and publish your review incorporating a headline and graphics.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Once you have written your review, reread it. Look for ways to improve the communication of your ideas. Write a second draft.
- 2 Read another person's review. Write comments about the strength of the review. Discuss your responses with the person who wrote the review.
- 3 Give your review to someone else to read and ask them to make notes on your review. Discuss their comments. Write a final draft.

Three Delicious Courses

Sydney Theatre Company revives Andrew Bovell's *After Dinner*

by Jessica Lyons

Andrew Bovell's first major play success has been revived in Sydney Theatre Company's lively production of *After Dinner*. Detailing the events of a typical 1980s Aussie Friday night, the audience is transported back in time to when big hair and shoulder pads were all the rage and carnations were found on every restaurant table. Aided by alcohol, inhibition quickly disappears as the characters begin to 'cut footloose'.

First performed in 1988, *After Dinner* was the play that launched Bovell's epic career and put his work on the Australian theatre map. A departure in tone and style from his later work, such as *When The Rain Stops Falling* and *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, the play begins in a pub bistro, where Dympie (Rebecca Massey), an uptight spinster, and Paula (Anita Hegh), forever single, invite a recently widowed work colleague, Monika (Helen Thomson) to share dinner. At another table sit some awkward prospects, Gordon (Glenn Hazeldine), the recently abandoned husband, and Stephen (Josh McConville), the single bloke who wants a woman, but not a commitment. As the night progresses and wine bottles are emptied, the oddities of each character expose a deep sense of loneliness.

Directed by Imara Savage, this retrospective piece presents audiences with a hilarious and at times painfully familiar take on the 1980s night out. The laughter and nods of recognition suggest that this is a show connecting with both memory and

nostalgia. However, while the play is so iconically '80s, Bovell's script holds a timelessness about it, which engages both those who lived the decade and those who, like this reviewer, were but a distant thought.

Greeted with the classic pub bistro scene of plastic plants, vinyl chairs and painted feature walls, the audience was welcomed by an all too familiar scene. Alicia Clement's mission to '*recapture the intimacy of small theatre spaces*' was vital in amplifying the awkward traits of the characters and building the dramatic tension. Not only was the audience positioned in intimate proximity, but the characters were thrust into various awkward social moments, made more so because of the tight use of space.

Clement's costume design also paid homage to the era's fabulously loud and cringe-worthy garments. Emerging in a pink parachute hoodie, Paula's fashion statement suited her eccentric naivety, while Gordon's gaudy patterned shirt screamed his desire for a fun night out. Armed with an overly stuffed bosom, Dympie was quite literally a frumpy woman, desperately seeking a good time, but not at the expense of 'holding the table'.

Clement's bold costume choices supported Savage's decision to direct her actors in a heightened style. There was a vulnerability and sensitivity in each performance, however,

crucially, there were also moments of heightened comedy that paid homage to the almost farcical portions of the script. This was supported by the soundtrack of epic rock ballads and pop melodies.

One of the more memorable examples of this stylistic shift happens after dinner, in the second act, when Monika (Thomson) launches into a tale of Shakespearean proportions. Monika describes her waltz through open green fields (the pool table), the puffy clouds that surrounded her (the smokers' area) and her swim through a mysterious lake (the ladies' bathroom). Monika's drunken recall of her trip to the bar and back was remarkably well played by Thomson, sending the audience into rapturous laughter. Thomson's performance reflects the worthiness of her many accolades, and is worth the ticket price alone.

Massey is exceptional in her role as Dympie: stubborn and lonely. Her expressions and reactions are as tight as the control she tries to

wield over her companions. Later in the second act, tension builds between Dympie's dedication to holding the table (despite there being another two free) and Paula's need to get closer to the music and dance the night away. This boiling conflict causes Dympie to mount the very table she has guarded all night. The moment acts as a turning point, highlighting Bovell's key idea about the great clash between the objectives of friendship and singledom.

Sydney Theatre Company brings the embarrassing trends of the '80s back to life, and the convincingly accurate portrayals of the characters provided a light-hearted trip down memory lane. The play struck a perfect balance between good fun and poignancy, while the revitalisation of familiar memories encouraged the audience to remember that every Friday night calls for 'dancing on the ceiling'.



Written task: review of a performance

Student Teacher

Group names

By completing this task you should be able to:

- identify aspects of a performance for evaluation
- evaluate and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a performance
- appreciate how the elements of a performance work together
- use examples from a performance to support opinions
- use appropriate language to discuss ideas
- use computer technology to publish a review of a performance.

| Key learning areas | Level of achievement | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|
| | Beginning | Consolidating | Mastering | Excelling |
| <p>Creating, making and exploring ideas using skills, knowledge, techniques and processes:</p> <p>Responding</p> <p>Have you communicated an understanding of the overall play by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • summarising the plot and story? • describing and explaining the themes and issues? • describing the directorial concept, its appropriateness and effectiveness? • using examples to support your opinions? <p>Have you considered the actors' interpretation of character by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluating the actors' performances of their characters? • using examples to support your judgements? <p>Have you considered the impact of the production elements on the overall performance by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • commenting on the impact of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – set? – costume? – lighting? – sound? • using examples to support your opinions? <p>Have you expressed your ideas well by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using appropriate language and terminology? • creating a well-structured review that is clear, sophisticated and articulate? • presenting a review in a clear format that includes a title and graphic? | | | | |

Comments
