

**Spark Event – “Critic Dunk Tank”**

**Fergie’s Pub**

**Monday, June 9, 2008 – 7pm**

*Notes taken and typed by Michelle Jacob,*

*Administrative Assistant for the Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia*

**I. Introduction**

A. Karen

- Thank you to Fergie’s Pub for hosting this event.
- Submit your resume to be included in the 2008 Production Resource Book.

B. Bruce Walsh, Metro theatre critic and playwright

- Bruce gives an introduction, including past jobs, theatre experiences (Brat’s Bald Soprano) and his thoughts on writing, both playwrighting and theatre reviews.
  - *A copy of this speech is available on the Theatre Alliance website.*
- He gets to write what he thinks about theatre artists work, but now he wants to hear what artists think of his work as a theatre critic
- Questions Bruce poses for discussion
  - a. Is the underground over crowded? Are there too many emerging theatre companies?
  - b. Are we willing to try new models? Does every 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> theatre artist need their own company?
  - c. Is there a better way for critics and theatre artists to communicate?

**II. Open Discussion – Q & A with Bruce Walsh**

A. How do you as critic review smaller companies?

- With new or emerging theatres, the Metro allows Bruce to focus features on a specific angle because that is news.
- Bruce has a set rule: If a company is new or emerging, it is not his job to critique. Established theatres, such as Arden or Wilma get reviewed.

B. Do small theatre companies need reviews or features?

- The purpose of a review is to tell the public whether or not to see the show.
- Different from music critics, theatre critics review all different genres.
- Theatres want to use quotes from reviews not features.
- Metro only has 3 pages for A&E. They can’t review everything because movies and music would not be covered.
- If you are Theatre Alliance member, Bruce assumes you are a serious company. If your show is on Theatre Alliance website, consider him notified.
- He responds better to personal emails rather than press releases. If a show is pushed down his throat, it is less appealing to see and review that show.

C. How do critical reviews serve the theatre company? How does the theatre’s work serve newspapers? Where is the compromise? Do reviews affect ticket sales?

- When writing reviews, Bruce thinks about what worked and what didn't. He wants to meet the show where it is.
- Reviews provide free advertising through space that you are not paying for.
- The Metro is free, and people from all walks of life pick it up. Having any kind of theatre coverage is encouraging.
- Bruce is interested in creating a website for theatre-only discussion because he has received good feedback from his onion-esque online column.
- Inquirer announced that they will only cover theatres who are Barrymore eligible.
- General public is looking for someone to tell them what to see.
- Discussion around pros/cons of preview/review vs. feature articles.
- Reading criticism itself is a form of entertainment.
- Writing a 400-word review is difficult because you are trying to communicate information while entertaining.
- Writers don't write the headlines.

#### D. Angle stories to highlight multiple companies

- What about finding an angle to highlight 3 underground, smaller theatres? This approach is done every day of the Live Arts/Philly Fringe Festival.
- Can the companies get together to help find the angle for critics? This will come from theatres being aware about what other theatres are doing.

#### E. Connecting with the audience

- Theatres need to think more proactively about marketing/producing and not going after the critics for help. Be proactive in planning how to reach out to the audience.
- We are not in a newspaper-based society. Regional theatre is not thriving. How can we rebuild American Theatre? Make it a sellers market.
- No one is going to give money to closed theatre companies. We have to stop thinking about brick and mortar, and focus on creating great art.
- Define your company's mission and uniqueness for yourself and the community.

#### F. Why is the theatre community so fractured?

- Theatres are not able to collaborate as often because of trying to keep up with their 501c3 status and grant applications, etc.
- Even if your point of view is being represented, it isn't your own point of view.
- There are too many chiefs. It is up to the directors to open their doors and share responsibility.

#### G. Opportunities to meet and share ideas.

- Fringe is so much fun because you bump into people and start up conversations.
- The Theatre Alliance is a resource. We have the events, but you have to show up! Even if you aren't interested in a topic, come for the networking opportunities.
- Discuss idea of a Wiki theatre project to open up the creative and producing process. Anyone can contribute to the creation of new work of theatre.
- Send website updates and ideas to Karen, such as categories for our 'List by Month' pages. Send press releases electronically to Theatre Alliance for posting on our website.