
AXS ENTERTAINMENT / ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT / PERFORMING ARTS

In defense of a Tulsan critic

May 2, 2016

11:43 PM MST



Chris O'Rourke

Some of the responses to James Watts' well balanced review for Tulsa World of Tulsa Project Theatre's apparently lamentable opening night for "Billy Elliot:The Musical," give serious pause for thought. Granted, there has been much support and many lively, intelligent and perceptive responses to the review. But there have also been some vicious and almost mob like, personal attacks on social media, all indefensible in defense of the indefensible. A critical kicking of the critic for daring to hold a company accountable to its own standards, and for calling them out for falling short.

If a company claims to be professional then you expect a professional opening night. If that doesn't happen then there lies the evidence that paying actor's equity rates doesn't necessarily constitute professional standards. Not that a critic cannot be held accountable themselves. But look at the evidence found in many of the more asinine excuses offered up as justification for the substandard work that was called into question. We, or they, did their, or our best. It's a hard job. It's the venue's fault. It's someone else's fault. We're not Broadway. Look at what you have to work with. It was opening night. One bad show doesn't make us unprofessional. Then there's the usual allegations that the critic was vicious, humiliating and, of course, he holds grudges. But most damning and revealing of all: this is Tulsa, what do you expect? Take some time on these,

especially that last one. Read the subtext and let the implications sink in.

The old adage rings true here. Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it. It seems all of this was prompted by an article on honest, critical engagement with community theatre. Talk about stating the obvious. Community or professional theatre, both should be open to honest critical engagement. In some cases, if word of mouth on Theatre Pops' "August: Osage County" is to be believed, community theatre often exceeds professional theatre's standards. For now, two reasons out of dozens will suffice. The first being that if you ask people to invest their hard earned time and money in attending your show then they have every right to expect standards of excellence, and critics who will inform them if they are, or are not delivered. Secondly, if the work being presented purports to be of a standard, it deserves to be held accountable to that standard and given a critical evaluation. A critics' opinion is not just an opinion, it's an informed and considered opinion. Few are more informed, or generous, often generous to a fault, when it comes to Tulsa theatre than James Watts.

A critic knows no company sets out to fail, but they have a responsibility to honestly assesses the work and offer an informed and considered opinion based on their knowledge and experience. An opinion designed to inform the company of what they need to work on and the audience on what they can expect, so they can decide if they want to give up their time and money. These shows aren't free. Nor are they elementary school nativity plays where everyone goes along and applauds sweet little Johnny and Mary for being so cute running about onstage and doing such a wonderful job. Though that seems to be exactly the level certain voices appear to be advocating for as critical engagement for community, and sometimes professional theatre. If any critical engagement at all.

A critic is also required to be critical on behalf of, and sometimes directly of, the community itself. Of provoking and contributing to critically engaged conversations in a balanced and honest way. You cannot have theatre without critical engagement of the works, the companies, the context and the issues. But who's asking the big critical questions in Tulsa? About the cost and standard of tech at the PAC, the role and ramifications of the recently launched Tulsa Arts Alliance, the ongoing saga of the restrictive focus of The TATE's and how the Tulsa Fringe, if you can call it that, essentially functions as an extension of Summerstage? Where is the critical platform for these and for other questions to be raised? And what critic would dare raise such issues given the personal attacks they suffer when they write so much as an unpopular review?

To cultivate theatre of the highest standard, you don't shoot down those who hold you to those standards. Otherwise, all that remains is some form of unquestioned, self-indulgent exhibitionism, with the added audacity of expecting your audience to pay and applaud you for doing so. If that's your thing, by all means go ahead and do it. But don't dare call that making theatre. Don't dare compare that to the work of those who set out to make the best theatre possible, who demand rigorous feedback and who don't resort to vindictive, self-justifying, defensive tantrums when a critic says you need to do better.

A critic is not a publicist, nor there to indulge vanities. He, or she, is there to support those who aspire to the best. Who aspire to the day when people will say, "I saw the most amazing show in

Tulsa. But what else would you expect? That's Tulsa.”

Maybe we should take some time on that one. Read that subtext. Let those implications sink in.



Chris O'Rourke
Tulsa Theater Examiner

© 2006-2015 AXS Digital Group LLC d/b/a Examiner.com