
Playwrights, Audiences, Critics--All on Campus

Jo Allen Bradham, Ph. D.
Professor of English

English 306, Creative Writing: Drama, breaks the usual triumvirate of instructor, students and material to include an essential fourth—invited critics. The class is a workshop in which students, for each meeting, bring in sections of the plays they have in progress, and members of the class double (or more nearly triple) as actors performing the lines, critics analyzing and interpreting the lines, and audience responding to the new play. All of us learn and laugh (and sometimes cry), but by the end of the quarter we need an outside audience. For the last two meetings, or performances as we call them, students invite family and friends, and I urge faculty members to come. Of our audience, two individuals are especially important. I invite theatre professionals—playwrights, actors, directors or a combination of these talents—to listen to the readings and comment. These individuals bring a fresh mind, an experienced ear for what works in a play, and a keen interest in finding and helping new playwrights. Hearing one's first efforts read before these guests is not easy on the nerves, but students find it stimulating and beneficial.

After the reading of the plays and the responses of the visiting critics, I asked the students to write their reactions so that I could share them with *Reaching Through Teaching*. They could sign their names or remain anonymous, as they chose. The response was overwhelmingly positive, although Alan Sanders noted that he felt acting out would be better than a staged reading and that cooperative efforts with the theatre department so that "dedicated actors [could] bring the scripts of dedicated playwrights to life" would be better than the present system. Derek Putnam recommended that instead of asking actors or directors, we should invite only practicing playwrights. He did note, quite sensibly, that having "Wendy Wasserstein is too much to hope for."

Perhaps in time more sophisticated readings and more specialized critics will be possible, but for the moment the system seems to work. According to Lyn Anduze, the public reading was a "wonderful experience" in which the "negative criticisms were just as good as the positive because the positive was encouraging and the negative was honest." Art Howard's metaphor conveys that the experience demanded the stamina of a fighter: "the belting . . . was certainly healthy for those receiving the critical eye." An anonymous respondent had much to say about the value of criticism. "I really enjoyed the frankness of the critics," the



student began and then continued: "All of the critics were superb in expressing themselves, but they did not 'pillow' their remarks. They cut right to the core of what needed work or severe revision."

Playwrights manage words in sensitive ways, as various comments show. David Bernardy explained that the readings taught him "how tolerant an audience will be, how long they will indulge . . . words until they demand some justification for what they are hearing." Then he identified the guests as those with an "knowing, ignorant view" and went on to explain his terms: "Ignorant" in that they hadn't "lived" with our characters all quarter, as the rest of the class had. "Knowing" in that they knew what they heard and they knew what their own feelings were about it." Steve Harper, who wrote a play about bungee jumping, carried the metaphor of his play over into his evaluation: "These readings were a great way to be involved in what felt like a performance with a safety net."

To Greg George, these theatre professionals proved a major bonus for the course: "An incredible experience! To be a student at a relatively young age and have your writing taken seriously is a great thing. The comments they gave were cutting at times, but they were cutting at the times that needed it. I imagine that it would boost the confidence of any young writer to actually have his words listened to by people who make their living on such words. It really brings the outside world into the classroom for a peek into what the students are up to."

English 306 may be off-off-off-off-Broadway, but these first-time playwrights see the lights ahead, and thanks to our off-campus critics, they are moving a little closer to the smell of the grease paint and the roar of the crowd.

For the playwrights who will assemble next spring, I invite you to be part of our audience. We need your response, too. An attentive audience is the best teacher a playwright can have. ●