

My name is Lyn Gardner. I have written and I guess thought out loud about performance for almost 40 years, largely writing about work in the UK but also about work on the international stages.

I've written for a vast number of publications and I spent 23 years writing for The Guardian and I also do quite a lot of broadcast work.

Liz said I was going to give a Lecture and I remember I was a bit worried about the term lecture because it sort of always makes me feel as though it's about ticking people off a bit but in some ways I write a regular column in The Stage, a newspaper which is the UK's industry newspaper for the theatre and dance industries and I often feel that what it is that I am doing in that column is holding the performance Industries to account.

That is part of what my function is so I hope this isn't going to sound in any way like ticking off. It is in fact, I'm going to throw quite a lot of stuff out there and in the discussion afterwards, we can talk about specifics and perhaps we can talk more about some practicalities but anyway here goes.

I think the most interesting production of Beckett's 'Not I' that I think I've ever seen was performed by a UK theatre maker Jess Thom. Jess has Tourette's Syndrome which involves extensive physical and verbal tics it meant that Thom was incapable of sticking to the script and frequently Beckett's carefully chosen words were punctuated with the utterance 'biscuit', a word that Thom can't stop herself from saying thousands of times a day.

Did this ruin Beckett's great miniature? On the contrary, it made me see it in entirely new ways. It made me sit up and

really listen rather than just experience the monologue as a tsunami of words.

It wasn't just funnier but more poignant too. It was much less the virtuoso toward force that it has often become for performers certainly within the Anglo-Saxon kind of performance culture, and much, much more fragile and human, much more Fully Alive.

I wonder what the American dance critic Arlene Croce would have heard a thought about this performance because in 1994 they wrote an essay in the New Yorker, an essay that some of you may know about why she had refused to review a review Bill T Jones AIDS Inspire dance piece.

According to crochet, 'Still Here' was victim art that put itself beyond criticism...

I contribute someone I feel sorry for or hopeless about declared crochet is that sometimes still a widespread issue faced by the critic when they see a piece of work made by death neurodiverse and disabled artists

I think that because the presence of the disabled are might invoke sympathy or pity that it puts it beyond criticism.

I reckon Arlene would have had a pretty difficult job when faced with King Lear which in the best Productions invokes pity in its audience for a foolish broken old man or for most Greek tragedies or indeed many of the plays of Samuel Beckett.

Arlene is responding to 'Still Here' not like a critic but like a social worker.

She is incapable of seeing past disability to the art, I think we're all guilty of that sometimes.

I'm going to give you the opening paragraph of a review from the critic of a British newspaper of a play called 'On blindness' which was at SoHo theatre. It goes like this, this is the first paragraph. As I arrived

home in a filthy mood after witnessing 'on blindness' my wife kindly asked what sort of evening I had had. Ghastly, I replied. One of the worst shows I've ever seen. What was it about then? She inquired. Love, sex and people with various kinds of disability. There's a deaf actor, a blind actress and a chap with very little in the way of arms. She said thoughtfully, so you won't be able to put the boot in then will you? I suppose, not I replied but as I sit down to write the review, it seems to me it would be the worst kind of mealy-mouth hypocrisy not to trash this rubbish. Audiences after all are required to pay for their tickets, presumably those involved and there are an awful lot of them want to be taken seriously and wouldn't it be perniciously patronizing to praise the show as worthy merely because it deals with disability issues, rather than loudly to declare that it is one of the most unappetizing piles of steaming crap I have encountered in many a long months? Listen the bluntness and almost glee with which Charles Spencer's states his case is I think pretty shocking. Nonetheless it also gets straight to the heart of the quality and criticisms criticism debate which so often seems to rage around work made by disabled artists. Do critics resist writing about particular kinds of theatre, particularly theatre made by disabled artists because they fear that they cannot be honest? Do they feel inhibited because as Susan sometimes once suggested in what I think sounds quite like an echo of Crochet's position, while a work of art may appeal to our sympathy, it is not necessarily validated by the worthiness of this appeal? What does it take for critics to review performance not on the basis of the

individual achievements of those involved making the work or its social value but on its Aesthetics and whether the show sits proudly cheek by jowl with other work being reviewed? Maybe at the same theater or at other venues.

Of course this begs the question of whether all performance should be reviewed in exactly the same way or should different kinds of performance be reviewed in different ways and is what we mean by quality different when we are talking about different kinds of performance made by different companies and different artists?

In traditional criticism, the critic can only review what they see. I can't review intent, I can't review the fact that the people putting on the show will almost certainly have expended much time and effort and maybe even have sold their granny to raise the money to do the show or that they have particular hurdles to overcome before they get up on stage in the first place.

Of course I will be aware that the show is often merely the visible manifestation of a much longer process that has been taking place over many weeks maybe even years. The show is just the tip just as most of an iceberg is under the water and never glimpsed maybe we have to be prepared as critics to look at where else in a project value might reside

the value of the project and not just its quality will lie not just in the final show or product but in process and that raises other questions, what was the experience of making the work like for the people involved? What impact has it had in the longer term?

Has the project helped to create new possibilities and changed participants in any way?

It's changed how we think of Art traditional criticism doesn't allow for that although other forms it seems to me

such as embedded criticism sometimes, academic writing, even features can and might do that and maybe that's something we might like to explore a bit when I've shut up.

Context, the means of production and the conditions under which a piece of work is made very, very widely interestingly, that can appear to create issues for the critic.

Also think that audiences are often way ahead in instinctively understanding the differences.

When I go and see my grandchildren's Primary School production of a show I will view it through different eyes than those with which I would see a professional revival of the same piece of work. The function of my grandchildren's School production is quite different from the function of a professional production of the same piece which will have a professional cast and creatives, and ticket prices that reflect that.

You can't judge both Productions by the same criteria because their functions are different. They're set in time, they set entirely different expectations. One charges, the other doesn't. One attracts a specific audience who come because they have children or grandchildren at the school. The other is seeking a much broader audience and validation.

I think that what we need to be clear about is that it's not that one is better than the other. They are simply different in the same way that a boiled egg and scrambled eggs are very different but both taste delicious, well in my opinion.

In any case I think the issues around quality are always fraught. Ideas of quality and Excellence come created with notions of high art of exclusivity and other elitism that includes the possibility that certain kinds of work inherently carry

with them. Equality - this means that a Shakespeare or an Ibsen play will always be considered by some as being a quality piece of work whereas a devised play created with and for the community is considered to be of lesser value and therefore lesser quality.

We know this is absurd. We have all sat through dire revivals of Shakespeare in Love, in some cases produced by well-funded and much famed theatre companies with a reputation for quality and we have all been enchanted or swept away by a show created for or with perhaps the community on minimal resources.

Of course the chances are that the latter will never receive the kind of cultural recognition that comes with being widely reviewed what is valued in our culture tends to be what is reviewed in our culture that means that there are entire swathes of work produced that are entirely ignored whether it shows that defy being boxed in because they don't fit neatly into some kind of category. Or maybe it's work made for children or it's participatory or intergenerational work or it's made with and for communities. I think the same applies to work made by disabled artists. It is work which is often assumed that it must be less worthy of attention but I would argue that in adding to the diversity of our theatre culture, it enriches it until we fully embrace the position that diversity is not a problem that somehow fowl we feel obliged to address or maybe solve in some way but instead see it as an opportunity. We will never widen the pool of people who can access making theatre and who will make our theatre cultures rich varied sustainable and relevant.

I think criticism has a role to play in this in an enabling but I think it also has to sit alongside other tools including developing disabled artists

but also developing other Advocates including disabled programmers, curators and marketeers who can assist in widening audiences and help institutions think differently about how and where they place work and how they support it.

When in the UK a three million pound Unlimited fund was created to fund ambitious commissions made by decent disabled artists of all kinds, this wasn't not just an initiative about creating work of quality but also about creating a range of work with breadth and depth.

The point is Unlimited senior producer Jo Verrent put it in her usually blunt manner was not to create the world's most expensive ghetto but rather to stop programmers from programming and the first piece of work they come across with a wheelchair and a guide dog in it. Presenting and responding to the work made by disabled artists is not just an issue for criticism, it is a programming issue too. The two go hand in hand but criticism I think has the potential to help drive change in that respect. I never believed that it is the critics role to shape our theatre cultures, that's a job for artists but I firmly believe it is the critic's job to be a midwife not a gatekeeper. I'm very much with the American curator and arts commentator Nina Simon when she talks about how much culture lives in locked rooms with tiny doors which limits who does and doesn't have access to the womb, whether it's artists or as audience.

Sometimes I think we critics behave a bit like the Rottweilers guarding that door and the tendency is particularly seen when it comes to reviewing performance which does not look like theatre we have seen before, does not sound like performance we have seen before, and which is created and

performed by people who do not look and sound the same as us and who have entirely different life experiences.

It seems to me that all encroaches problem is the problem that many of us critics face when encountering work made by artists who are making dance and performance which offers a different perspective and comes from a different place.

And that's because we are often bound by societal notions of disability and illness.

We see the artists on stage as an objective pity or as a burden rather than simply saying them as an artist with a different toolbox available to them than other artists.

We are very guilty of ableism a behavior that unintentionally excludes or actively discriminates against disabled people.

It applies to a wide range of situations. Ableism sees Olivier and Anthony share playing Richard III in ways that harness disability as a means of showing evil as perfectly normal but recoils that the idea of a disabled person playing Richard.

Ableism says that if Juliet in Romeo and Juliet is claimed by an actor who is a wheelchair user then the play becomes about a wheelchair.

Nobody would now say at least not in the UK that if you cast a black or female actor as Hamlet that the play becomes about that so why do we do it with disability?

Why do we always assume that performance made by disabled artists also has to foreground disability?

As critics what we often do is think about what we review in the context of our probably vast experience of seeing different kinds of performance in the past and measure what we see against that the danger is that that always keeps us looking backwards not forwards.



The danger is that when we encounter a performance that uses a different language a different way of being which is not in the least like the vast repository of other performances we have seen that we hold in our heads, that we do not have the language to write and speak about it and we are reluctant to learn.

But I think that we must expand our vocabulary or we will always be gatekeepers and never be midwives. We will always be defining what performance is by the narrowness of our previous experience and limiting but for performance by saying this is what thought theatre is rather than supporting artists to imagine what performance can and might be.

In the UK I would say that in recent years some of the most interesting theatre that I've seen has been made by learning disabled artists by companies such as Mind the Gap, Birds of Paradise, or individual artists such as Ian Johnston who with Gary Gardner made a two-hander called 'Dancer' examining who is and who is not allowed to dance, who is and who is not allowed to make performance, and to make a performance of themselves.

Early on in the show Gary makes a prescriptive list of all the people who are not allowed to dance the list includes those with no rhythm, those with missing arms and legs, and people like Ian who has a learning disability. 'Dancer' is a really exquisite piece of theatre and performance and one that is fiercely radical in the way it approaches neurodivergency and wonders what are stages and what our society would look like if everybody is allowed to dance.

Or take Mind the Gap's 'Contained' which upends all notions of high art excellence and well-made theatre and is radical both in content and form

redefining conventional ideas of quality and reminding that while we tend to value virtuosity of the theatre there are other things that learning disabled participants bring to theatre and bring to the table that are equally interesting.

It may indeed be excellent in its own distinctive way but contained also offers something potentially more exciting to disruption difference irregular irregularity and surprise like all diversity that adds to our theatre culture, broadening and deepening it and making it less monochrome.

In the UK discussions about the Creative Advantage of disability of being widespread.

I would subscribe to the idea as someone whose whole career has been informed by an invisible disability but did these two shows that I just mentioned get widely reviewed? They did, not in the case of 'Contained'. Mine was the only review in a broadsheet publication

and that's a problem because as I mentioned earlier, what it is that's reviewed is what is given validation and because reviews can help the best work to find new programming opportunities and new bookings.

I think one of the things that critics can really do is to push their editors to be bolder and braver about the range of work a publication reviews listen I know that is not easy and it is particularly not easy if your relationship with your editor is that of a freelance to somebody who is in a salaried job

but my experience at the Guardian tells me that it can be done. Before I joined, it had never reviewed a learning disabled company on its theatre pages and covered very little work made by deaf and disabled theatre makers. I think we need to push editors to make sure

that disabled art does not slip off their agendas and sometimes I think we need to use stealth to do this.

I think there are other things which we must do as critics, we must educate ourselves rather than expect disabled artists to do all the heavy lifting when we write about the work of disabled artists.

We must ensure that we are not making a spectacle of them even as we recognize that they are entitled to make a spectacle of themselves in any way they wish. We must be prepared to learn new vocabularies and to reframe our gaze we can do this and we should do this because none of us want to be our leads. Thank you very much.