

Kevin Bourke

Reviews in the Regions

The Critic's Perspective

*Far from the West End, theatre reviewers and the theatres and companies they cover often exist in a state of healthy symbiosis. Manchester arts critic Kevin Bourke discusses the relationship between theatres and critics in the regions for a series of blog posts originally published by **International Arts Manager***

First of all, let me say how depressing it is to read critics referring to star ratings, and the perceived lack of manoeuvrability in them.

They are limited, the devil's work, and an insult to everyone involved in the process: actors, directors, writers, the critics themselves and the audience.

Star ratings reduce any cogent argument to a dreary and meaningless shorthand for use by publicists. When readers actually read reviews they ought to be able to form their own value judgements, informed by what they know of the critic's foibles, their own personal tastes etc.

Ideally, critics should enlighten, educate and entertain – which doesn't mean falling into the trap of cheap jokes. They need to be trusted (which is not the same as being liked, necessarily) by both the people they are writing about and the people they are writing for.

Generally, this is not a position you arrive at straight away and it doesn't help the cause of thoughtful, valuable criticism when newspapers, magazines and broadcasters use the nearest available person to simply 'have a night out and write about it'.

If I want to hear what somebody with no qualifications, no interest, and no real information has to say about something then I'll earwig in the pub or on the bus. To the best of my knowledge media outlets don't, for example, use a fan who likes a bit of a kick-about to write about Manchester United – yet it seems the arts can be treated with that sort of contempt.

There is a fine balance that needs to be struck, though, between supporting regional arts and artists and being blithely uncritical of their output. This goes back as well to the necessity of the reviewer being perceived as an honest broker – or at least more trustworthy than paid advertisements and puff-piece interviews.

If a paying punter goes to see or hear something which you as a critic have praised to the skies, only to emerge baffled as to why they parted with their cash and wasted their time, then they're less likely to attend the next such show – and that is no use to anybody.

In my experience regional theatres, film companies etc. are perfectly happy for you to write more or less what you feel as long as they understand that what you are saying comes out of genuine passion and a depth of knowledge.

Prosaically, they also know that they will have another film or stage production coming right along and would rather maintain a trusting relationship that, in the long run, is to everyone's benefit.

In the main, many so-called 'national reviewers' are writing about London, which, the last time I checked, wasn't actually a whole country.

Moreover, the theatre scene in London is distorted by the number of tourist bums on seats. At Octagon Theatre Bolton or Oldham Coliseum Theatre, for example (both towns in the north of England) they actually have a local community to take seriously and the whole infrastructure of theatregoers, theatre practitioners and reviewers is much more vibrant because of this.

It's a sad and pompous reviewer who believes that he or she can make or break a show, as in the old Butcher of Broadway days, especially a blockbuster where everyone stands to lose lots of money.

I happen to love *The Lion King*, but I doubt if my enthusiastic review did much to influence its box-office success. On the other hand, it would be nice to think that positive reviews for a fantastic but marginal show like *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* can be of some help in bringing it to the attention of a wider audience.

Similarly the success of 24:7 Theatre Festival here in Manchester is cheering, proving that a bit of judicious support at a key point in development can actually pay off down the line.

Kevin Bourke is a regional and international independent broadcaster. After many years working at the Manchester Evening News as a writer on film, theatre, music and arts, including running the MEN Theatre Awards, he now works freelance.