

LETTERS

TO THE EDITORS:

In Michael Kirby's response to Richard Schechner's TDR "Comment" (T64), he expresses his "embarrassment" over the apparent lack of reaction to the Criticism Issue (T63). In part, this letter is an attempt to right the balance. More importantly, it deals with a contradiction that looms large in Kirby's writing and with which Schechner's "Comment" deals only in passing.

Kirby writes that "to suggest that criticism of art is useless and even harmful does not mean that all criticism should be abolished." Specifically, he refers to "social and political" criticism as examples of valuable critical writing. Yet, he fails to explain the way in which the social and political aspects of an artistic event can be distinguished from its other manifestations.

Perhaps the most important achievement of Bertolt Brecht's writings on the theory of the modern theatre is that they question the means as well as the ends of a theatrical experience. Brecht argues that it is not enough for a playwright (or actor, director, or ensemble) to have "correct" political ideas. What counts in the theatre is the way in which these ideas are conveyed to the spectator. In short, Brecht realizes that there is a strong political component to every performance and to each artistic "experience."

When Kirby argues that "the value attributes of experience . . . are ultimately private," one suspects that he is missing the point. Criticism is an attempt to deal with artistic intentions as well as with artistic results. The critic must deal with the events on stage as objectively as our sensory apparatus currently allows—just as each individual must judge a political process using the same (admittedly imperfect) sensory equipment. At its best, criticism allows for the obvious imperfections of this approach by dealing with the "what, how, and why" of an event before making value judgments. Ultimately, it is the moral responsibility of a critic (as opposed to the re-viewer) to

make these judgments which relate a given performance to the life and health of the community in which it occurs.

The Kirby approach is similar to that taken by most newspaper journalists. Invited to a performance of a Brecht play, newspaper reviewers generally fail to see the ways in which their own political opinions are relevant. This is a result of slicing reality into neat little packets with such names as "art," "politics," or "religion"—and maintaining that theatre criticism deals exclusively with the first of these packets. On the contrary, it should be argued that the three categories invariably impinge upon one another, and are, in the long run, inseparable.

In concrete terms, the problems inherent in Kirby's approach are revealed by the "Theatre Reports" and/or "Theatre Reviews" which have been featured in recent issues of TDR. For example, the "discussion" of Chaikin's *Electra* (T63) attempts to deal with theatre techniques while ignoring the uses to which these techniques are put. The result is pseudo-documentation which can have little use for posterity since the most urgent questions go unanswered. By failing to relate Chaikin's experimental presentation to the substance and vision of Montgomery's script, Kirby's report provides no guidelines with which to understand the production. In the same issue, the attempt to deal with Hal Prince's *Candide* fails to discuss the significance (social, artistic, and political) of transferring a set of revolutionary theatre techniques to the commercial stage. As a result, the article is incomplete reporting as well as inadequate criticism.

The cure for our current ills is more, and not less criticism. The present time is one of conformity and increasing facelessness. To meet the challenge represented by this unfortunate situation, society needs people in every field of endeavour who are willing to jeopardize their beliefs by expressing them forthrightly and with no fear of the consequences. It is only this approach that can restore criticism to

its proper place as one of the major social sciences.

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MICHAEL KIRBY replies:

Like certain critics, Forster Freed seems unable to distinguish between politics and art. Since the next issue of *The Drama Review* will be devoted entirely to political theatre, I will have the opportunity then to discuss the socio-political aspects of performance at greater length, but his letter deserves some answer now.

I see the data of art as being subjective. They are not merely the facts, ideas, references, and information presented by the work but, fundamentally, the qualities and the characteristics of the experience itself. This experience is immediate and self-validating in terms of the organism; value is a dimension of the experience rather than an intellectualized judgment. It is not a question of being persuaded that the art experience is good or bad. The organism has its own standards and it is the only judge. The experience of art is—and should be—different for each person.

Socio-political data are objective. The study is supra-individual and intellectual; it is carried out primarily in terms of abstract norms, generalities, averages, groups, classes, consensus, and so forth. Since objective criteria may be proposed and results evaluated against them, criticism is of a different order. Because of this fundamental difference between art and socio-politics, it is quite possible to feel that the experience of a performance is significant even when one does not approve of or agree with the intellectual content. The content is not necessarily validated in the same way.

I am not very much interested in politics; I am very much interested in art. For another, the opposite is true. Our experiences of the same performance are quite different. But one experience is not better or more correct than another. Someone, becoming a critic, should not tell me that I must learn more about politics in order to understand the truth of my the-

atrical experience. I will not tell him he should learn more about art so that his experience will be the same ("as good as," etc.) mine. Theatre critics do not respect personal differences.

Of course, art and politics "impinge upon" each other. (Sometimes I think that everything impinges upon everything else.) A continuum exists between the completely subjective and the completely objective. But this does not mean that they are "inseparable," either intellectually or in occurrence. Some art is political, in part, and some is not.

The reports in *The Drama Review* are another matter. Forster Freed feels that more could have been said in the reports on *Electra* and *Candide*. This is true. Because we cannot devote very much space to them, all of our reports—and even our long documentations—will be "incomplete." (Since they do not attempt to be criticism, they can also be considered "inadequate criticism," I suppose.) In our reports, we select certain aspects of the production that we believe will be useful and interesting to our readers and which we perhaps think will have historical importance. Thus, the brief piece on Chaikin's work concentrated on his change of approach and style. The piece on *Candide* was merely intended to establish the fact, if our readers had missed it in other publications, that certain forms of staging that not long ago were considered experimental are being used on Broadway. Each reader should be able to decide for himself whether these facts are meaningful, good or bad.

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