

Setting a New “Barre” for Arts Criticism

Posted on *October 16, 2014* by *Ann Marie Miller, ArtPride NJ Executive Director*



The earlier title for this blog post was “Another One Bites the Dust,” prompted by notice from Dance NJ staff that dance critic Robert Johnson is no longer writing for The Star Ledger, but is now working on a freelance basis.



By now all are familiar with the Ledger's new business model and the resulting journalistic staff layoffs that accompanied its Newark headquarters closure. ArtPride's [Dodge blog post in July](#) discussed the evolution of arts journalism in our state and beyond and mentioned crowdsourcing as a support system for new online entities like [njarts.net](#), [New Jersey Stage](#) and referenced those that are still working in print like [US1](#), which features the visual, literary and performing arts up and down the Route 1 corridor in a major way.

Two over-arching thoughts emerge from this continuing conversation. One is the significant public value that is uniquely offered by art critics.

Think of those who made careers in print from [Robert Hughes](#) and [John Rockwell](#) to [Pauline Kael](#), [Clive Barnes](#) and our very own [Michael Sommers](#) and [Peter Filichia](#). Their trained eyes and literary skills chronicled art history, both globally and locally, including the [culture wars of the 90's](#) and the [emergence of public art](#), but more specifically the breadth of New Jersey talent assuring it a vehicle by which to shine and not be obscured by nearby metropolitan behemoths (i.e., The New York Times).



The work of these critics provided a daily forum for art issues and related thought to arrive on the doorstep of hundreds of thousands of everyday people, offering an open, even relentless, invitation to participate.

The second thought considers the reciprocal relationship between the arts community and this very public discourse. Criticism and cultural coverage render significant benefit to artists and their respective arts fields. As Betsy Sobo, Executive Director of 10 Hairy Legs Dance

Company describes it, "Critics make us better artists. They may not always like what we do, but they provide a meaningful and often universal perspective of the field at large, and help us to question and become better at what we do."

And certainly now this way that artists, arts organizations and audiences tracked and shared information and knowledge no longer arrives on doorsteps, but must be independently sought elsewhere.

So, questions linger about the **future for arts critics**, where they will ultimately find homes and who will step onto their porches.



The Internet, while bountiful, relies on a free range of content being sought, unlike the more tangible and reliable print media that held journalistic and editorial standards as keystones of credibility. The Internet presents a contrasting and vast new frontier for both news and critical content.

Perhaps it is the civic responsibility of the millennial age, one that so eagerly devours electronically its personal content (and that of "friends") to assure that arts reporting and arts criticism remain central to broad-based media consumption. That responsibility extends to upholding standards, even if they are defined in new terms, lest the biggest loss be the pursuit of truth and an understanding of what has come before and the continuum on which we ride.

Even in a mobile mosaic like cyberspace, community can find common ground and in so doing raise surprising (even massive) new levels of broad-based, diverse public support for serious issues like ALS through this year's viral philanthropic Ice Bucket Challenge. But **can it be sustained** as consistent and everyday behavior?

In the July blog post, a comment was posted by Gary Wien of New Jersey Stage when he asked, “Are arts leaders afraid of moving in a new direction?”

Given the abundance of creative talent in New Jersey and beyond, it’s safe to say that arts leaders may be nervous about new modes and directions, but I dare say they are also excited by the implications and possibilities of innovation and adventurous pursuit. And while this all gets sorted out—just how the arts remain relevant and accessible to the everyday person through criticism and reportage — it’s also safe to assume that collaboration will thrive as arts groups turn to each other to face this and other challenges.

Those other challenges include decreased philanthropy, increased competition for leisure time and the need to adapt to the consumer habits of the millennial generation. To that point, a unique and creative collaboration and experiment in audience cross-fertilization was just announced by the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra and Gallery Aferro.

Their [Artist Box Initiative](#) will bring artists from the Newark-based art gallery to NJSO performances in Newark throughout the 2014-15 season and culminate in May with a Gallery Aferro exhibit of works inspired by the artists’ concert experiences.

But perhaps poignantly, this collaboration was reported by [Broadwayworld.com/newjersey](#), and I only randomly found it Monday as I was surfing Facebook. As I looked elsewhere, I didn’t come across any art critics reporting in a similar fashion that day.

We invite you to share your thoughts in the comments below.

Ann Marie Miller is Executive Director of ArtPride NJ, a statewide advocate for the arts. Learn more at <http://artpridenj.com/>.