

## MODULE OUTLINE

### PROGRAM/COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

When you complete this course, you will be able to...

- Express your personal voice as a critical responder.
  - Produce a critical response to a live or recorded theatrical performance that will take the form of a traditional theatre review and/or a creative response.
  - Choose active, meaningful, and specific vocabulary when responding to performances.
  - Recognize and reflect on your personal biases as a critical responder.
  - Understand, appreciate, and discern between the different elements of theatre production. (Eg. writing, directing, acting, design, the role of the audience).
  - Understand the role that critical response plays in processes of theatrical production and reception.
  - Be a discerning reader of theatre reviews and other forms of critical response.
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### MODULE 1—YOU'RE ALREADY A COMMENTATOR

#### Course

- Highlight that the user has likely already been practicing criticism and developing a voice without knowing it. "You already have a voice and a lived experience. We're here to encourage you to understand yourself as someone with those capabilities."
- Avoid the word "criticism" for now.
- Overview of course and learning outcomes.

#### Guide

- Writing exercise:
  - Choose a theatre production, TV show, or film you've already seen.
  - Describe it in 50 words, then 100 words, then in a 140-character Tweet.
- Videos:
  - Jose, Karen, and an Indigenous theatre artist each talk about what theatre criticism means to them.

### MODULE 2—WHAT CRITICS DO, AND THE REVIEW FORM

#### Course

- Why is it important for folk to share their responses to a play on a wider scale?
- What role/relationships do critics have in a healthy theatre ecology?
- "The purpose of criticism is to make people feel less alone" (Jose).
- Introduction of the review as the traditional form of critical response, consisting of description, analysis, and judgment.

- Initial querying/unpacking the review form for its colonial and patriarchal histories and assumptions (lone judgemental voice, assumption of objectivity).
- Start to introduce concepts of fact vs opinion; racism is a fact. “Boring” is an opinion.
- Presentation of alternative forms of response through examples (PDFs, videos, etc, including Rhiannon Hoover’s dance from *21 Black Futures*).

### Guide

- Video of conversation between Jose and a “representative critic” unpacking the description exercise from Module 1, pointing out overuse of adjectives and empty words.
- Walk-through of excellent review that uses powerful language and meaningful words.
- Writing exercise:
  - Write five negative adjectives and five positive adjectives.
  - Write a short 50-word composition that’s *positive* about the performance you wrote about in Module 1.
  - Now write a short 50-word composition that’s *negative* about the performance.
- Discussion: Why is it important that you consider your use of language in this role?
  - Offer examples of value-laden language and how this can be harmful.
  - Offer examples of reviews that call out sexism/racism/ableism in a production.
- Discussion: Why is it important that you consider the medium/form you use to respond?
  - Offer examples of non-traditional responses created with love, eg. Love Letters.
  - Unpack why some Indigenous artists feel reviews are not appropriate for their work.
- Activity:
  - Attend a live theatre production or watch an online recorded theatre production.
  - Make sure that someone you know is also seeing the performance.
  - Set a timer and free-write for 5 minutes about the production; or, audio-record yourself speaking about the production. An initial response. Don’t overthink!
- Glossary: what are facts and what are opinions?
  - Eg. White supremacy is a fact, “boring” is an opinion.

## MODULE 3—WHAT YOU BRING TO YOUR RESPONSE

### Course

- Consider how positionality and identity inform criticism.
- Talk through a representative sample of a review in which a critic foregrounds their positionality.
- Recorded conversation between Jose and “representative critic” about their revised Module 1 exercise. How did their positionality inform what they wrote? How did personal feelings fit in?
- Concept of intended audience: How do we know who a piece of theatre is aimed at?
- Who’s responding? What does having people whose lived experience is reflected in a show responding to a show add to the critical conversation?
- If the experience reflected on stage is not your own, how do you handle this?

### Guide

- Going deeper into the question of intended audience and passion-driven response; reference Stacy Wolf’s scholarship about girl fans and the musical *Wicked*.
- Do the Social Identity Wheel / Power Flower / Jose’s Circles of Power Exercise.
- How does your social identity inform what you wrote in your initial response for Module 2?
- Next steps with Module 2 Response:

- Write a list of five key elements of the production and your experience of it that you would discuss in a review.
- Elements could include a performance, a passage of writing, an element of the staging, an element of the design, an audience reaction, a feeling the production gave you.
- Write how you feel about those elements; ask someone else who has seen the performance what their take was.
- Did the other person identify elements that you didn't? How does that affect how you think about the show?

## MODULE 4—DIGGING INTO PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS AND THE REVIEW FORM

### Course

- Breaking down a theatrical performance: how to discern which choices are made by a writer, director, actor, dramaturg, etc.
- Screen a clip from a play and break it down. Which choices were made by whom?
- Walk through a great piece of criticism, point out three stages: description/analysis/judgment.
- Reminder of subjectivity of concepts of quality, beauty, excellence

### Guide

- It's time! Write a 600-word review of the production you viewed for Module 2, making reference to your initial response, the five elements you know you want to include, and the other learning so far. You may not even be able to get all five elements in! Criticism is about making choices.
- Criticism as a journey from "I like this" to "this is good" (Octavio Roca).
- Jose's version: a journey from "I like this" to "why I like this."
- Nathaniel's version: a journey from "I like this" to "this is important."
- Words like "important" and "significant" are too broad. We can't be ahistorical. These concepts of quality need to be nuanced and framed.

## MODULE 5—THE TRADITION OF CRITICISM AND WHERE YOU FIT IN

### Course

- Share straight-cis-white-male-centred history.
- Share alternative histories of criticism (eg. Zora Neale Hurston).
- Share examples of artists talking back to criticism.
- How is the format/medium of critical responses changing?
- Evolution of examples, including Eve Nichols' Edinburgh Fringe Reviews (three sequential photos of cats); blog-style reviews; conversation reviews; TikTok reviews; embedding.

### Guide

- What kind of alternative / creative response can you take on?
- What media, tools, and skills do you have? Would you like to work digitally, or create an analog response such as a drawing, collage, or performance?
- Creating responses that mirror / respond to the work itself. Examples from *21 Black Futures*: Emily Radcliffe's song, Dante Jemott's rap, Teri Blades' poem. Share Interview videos by them about their choices.
- Assignment: Explore your own history by creating a timeline of your life through artistic and cultural things that you love (TV, music, videos). (This is an autobiography through pop culture.)

## MODULE 6—TAKING THIS FORWARD

### Course

- Challenge them to consider where and how they'd like to fit into the current landscape.
- This Module will focus on Toronto / Canada but techniques and advice are applicable elsewhere.
- Landscape of theatre reviewing in Canada.
- How to identify and approach possible critical / response outlets (list in the Guide).
- How to approach theatres about embedding / writing about and for them (list in the Guide).
- How to identify and approach further training / mentorship opportunities. If there isn't one where you are, ask for one!
- Question of financial compensation / changing understanding of professionalism cf. MacArthur / Lynch / Mealey.
- Professional organizations such as the Canadian Theatre Critics Association.
- Creation and nurturing of critical community for good times and bad (Introduce idea of online hate).

### Guide

- Canada-specific info here.
- Resources and lists of associations, theatres, other programs. (Eg. Critics Labs, Fringe New Young Reviewers, Newworld program, Festival Transameriques program.)
- Assignment: Where to go next.
  - Practice embedding on social media or comments on IG/TikTok?
  - Take your thoughts out into the public and share them where you see fit. See if you can start a conversation. Contact an artist that you love, and tell them you love something they did specifically at a performance you saw. Go on Reddit or TikTok and start a dialogue / share an opinion.
  - Ask someone "What did you think?", whether in your life or online. Try to start a convo, not end one.
  - Be an active participant in a theatre talkback.
- BOX / SECTION: How to avoid online hate (link to maintaining your mental health while dealing with the discourse).