

Los Angeles

National Critics Conference

Gil French

When more than 400 members of associations of classical music critics, jazz journalists, dance critics, theatre critics, and art critics met in Los Angeles May 25-29 for the first National Critics Conference, writer, producer, director, and keynote speaker Norman Lear focussed the mind immediately by reminding us that the book, *On Bullshit*, was No. 8 on the New York Times Best-seller List that week.

Lear illustrated why by pointing out that "George Bush had a blue drape placed over Picasso's *Guernica* when visiting the U.N., and John Ashcroft veiled a statue's breasts lest they send the wrong message". He said the title refers to "bullshit artists": those who are no stranger to the truth but don't care about it, who know what they're shoveling is BS, but also know the public will accept it and honor it anyway. Lear added that, in the secretive, authoritarian milieu following September 11, 2001, with political and religious leaders touting a simplistic black-and-white view of life and railing against "relativism", it is the critic's job to discuss *multiple* meanings, *different* interpretations, and to tell *two* sides of a story because art sees the messiness of life.

A panel of such victims, the Arts & Entertainment Editors of the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Dallas Morning News, and Denver Post, came across as representatives of the dumbing down of America. Denver's Ray Rinaldi wants from his critics "smarter, faster, shorter". Chicago's Scott Powers actually said that his ideal is "a three-inch piece of interesting criticism". (That's barely enough room to state who-what-when-where-why!) When asked why the Los Angeles Times hasn't had a full-time theatre critic for three years, Lisa Fung's hollow excuses were jeered. And they danced like puppets when asked what they pay

free-lance writers per article: \$25 to \$500 said Rinaldi to laughter. Powers finally focused the average to around \$150-\$200.

Above all, two things were clear: first, when internet critics and bloggers can start interactive conversations many hours before the New York Times can print a review, newspapers are in a panic because they no longer control either reporting or opinion. Second, while critics are at the mercy of second-level arts editors, their editors in turn are preserving their own jobs by dancing to the dictates of higher-level editors and publishers.

The above served as the conference's entertainment. The substance of the meeting was elsewhere. One topic that both the editors and critics did share, though for totally different motives (to save money and sell papers vs. to be more versatile in a multimedia environment) was the need for critics to diversify their interests. Columbia University's Coco Fusco said that, as a teacher, actress, and interactive communicator who "negotiates with individuals regularly", she knows concretely who her audience is vs. having some abstract notion of audience while sitting in front of a computer. She added that in the 1980s art philistines "stayed apart from popular culture [on the theory that] cultural relativism was destroying eternal values". She called them representatives of "The Academy", whereas younger artists and students don't have such distinctions today.

In fact, one major thrust that defined the conference was that a mix of pop culture, dance, jazz, classical music, film, amplification, actors, and visual art is now common in every media, and woe to critics locked into their narrow specialties. They're not only at a loss of expertise but are probably so philistine that the political, religious, and "news" implications of new works pass them by. Frequent

references were made to the Vietnam era, when artists and critics were in the forefront of questioning authority and war, whereas today's atmosphere is one of silence in the face of war, torture, and absolutism.

Pianist Gloria Cheng, who specializes in new music, put it differently. She emphasized the need to "inhabit the right universe" if you're going to deliver (and critique) an artist's language. In other words, get out of your own universe and learn to see things differently.

The other major thrust of the conference concerned the internet. As Susan Elliott of MusicalAmerica.com said, she can beat the New York Times with a story. Allan Ulrich of VoiceofDance.com added that he can write with no space restrictions, assigns himself his own stories, can correct his mistakes, and archive everything. Andy Propst of AmericanTheatreWeb.com pointed out that, because there are now seven theatre web sites covering off-Broadway and small theatres, the New York Times has finally been forced to compete with them.

On a personal note, I've had some common internet prejudices: after a day of working at a computer, that last thing I want is to go home and look at a computer! I crave contact with the rest of life: family, food, books, pets, garden, *experiencing* art. I've also regarded the Internet as having everything I've never need-

ed to know, including a lot of ignorant opinions. Why waste time on bloggers?

Instead, this conference has made me emotionally benevolent toward the Internet. Since part of a critic's function is to help people find out what's new and interesting, it offers incredible opportunities to open my mind and "learn new languages". As Rick Holter, Dallas News Arts Editor, said, "A fundamental role of the critic is to start a conversation, not issue a declaration". On the Internet, the critic's role is to be an educated, enlightened, stimulating, and provocative guide to the conversation.

Jack Miles of the J. Paul Getty Trust observed, "A culture becomes accustomed to not seeing things. It's the artist who breaks the spell of popular culture. Abroad, the relationship between art and commerce is an open topic, unlike in the USA." Conceptual artist Olu Oguibe added that in Nigeria, where he simply wrote about everything that was going on around him, conceptual art, installation art, and performance art are not distinguished. Perhaps a comment buried in final summaries gathered at the last session focussed the conference's buoyant spirit best of all: "We critics must connect our versatility to a wider range of subjects."



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