

CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESS by Lisa Sturz

(Based on the work of Liz Lerman and John Borstal of the Dance Exchange in Washington D.C.)

The process of creating an original work of puppet theatre can be a challenging and insightful journey. Constructive critical response is a tool to help us make the best work we can by inviting audience response in a structured and nurturing forum. It is a willing partnership between the artist and the audience.

Liz Lerman from The Dance Exchange in Washington, D.C., has been an innovator, laying out a road map for constructive criticism. Although her concepts evolved from work with dance, they have been widely embraced by theatres, educators, and businesses to help advance ideas.

THE PROCESS

The goal of the process is to help the artist fulfill their intentions. Peer response nurtures the artist and assists her/him to shape her/his inspiration into a cohesive and communicative artwork.

The critique session is conducted by a facilitator who invites feedback from audience members, responders, who choose to stay and participate after the performance. The facilitator's job is to explain the process, initiate discussion, manage the transitions from one step to another, and keep the comments on track. The facilitator can meet with the artist/artists beforehand to set time limits, guidelines and coach the artist to find questions that address their specific concerns. Together, they decide if they would like to assign someone as the note-taker during the session.

The responsibility of the artist is to be honest and open. They will benefit most if they are invested in the future evolution of the art. The artist needs to be in a place where they can question their own work in a somewhat public environment.

The facilitator begins by clearly defining the role of the responders. Their responsibilities are twofold: 1) to have a genuine desire for the artist to do her/his best work. 2) to listen to the motivation of the artist and be aware of how their own biases affect their responses so they can cultivate offering feedback in an impartial way.

1. Statements of Meaning

The facilitator starts with a question such as "What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, exciting, challenging, or meaningful to you as a viewer?" This offers the responders a palette of choices through which to define and express their reactions. Responders give the artist specific affirmations about the work and moments that have most affected them. People want to hear that what they have just completed has meaning for another human being. Surprisingly, positive feedback can be the hardest kind for the artist to accept. (A variation allows for responders to snap their fingers to indicate consent so the same comments don't need to be repeated and the artist has a knowledge of the extent to which the audience agrees with a given comment.)

Examples.

- "I really appreciated your use of color... especially when the lighting changed. "
- "The movements of the puppets were graceful and precise. I could tell you put thought into every gesture."

- "What had the most meaning for me was the paradox of strength and vulnerability in each of the characters."
- "I was moved by the tension between the beauty of the images and the horror of the story."
- "For me, the shock of the sudden collapse in the structure of the piece echoes the times we live in... in the audience we were all waiting for the next disaster to happen just as we did after 9/11."

2. Artist Questions Responders

The artist has the opportunity to ask the viewers about the work. If the artist has given careful thought to these questions beforehand; it gives the responders clues as to what the artist herself/himself thinks are the weaknesses in the work. General questions such as "So what did you think?" usually illicit a broad spectrum of reactions; but can be a risky invitation for dominating individuals to proclaim their opinions. The more specific the inquiry, the more focused the responders can be. The facilitator can help the artist to craft questions that get beyond yes or no answers.

The responders endeavor to answer the actual questions posed without going off on a tangent of their own. The artist can clarify what she/he is working on in order to attain a more meaningful dialogue. It is the motivation of the creator that is the basis on which feedback is given, so the artist should be very clear about her/his intent.

Examples:

- "In part two, I wanted to show that the clown character was confused without the audience feeling confused. What did you experience?"
- "I wasn't sure if I should use music when the puppet fell. Do you think it added to the moment or that silence would have been a stronger choice?"
- "Was it distracting or helpful that you could see the puppeteers?"
- "Which were the moments when you were less engaged or the moments that seemed less important for moving the story along?"
- "What did the hand holding the serpent symbolize for you?"

3. Responders ask the Artist NEUTRAL Questions

Responders ask questions of the artist about the work. This is a chance for the responders to help the artist step back and analyze the work. It is essential for the responders to examine their own reaction and personal bias before speaking and phrase the questions in a neutral way. The act of transforming an opinion into a neutral question is key to the process as a whole. It can be challenging to find the right words and often takes practice and careful self-reflection. The facilitator may ask someone to rephrase their question if it comes across abrasive or demeaning or if it reveals a strong opinion which could put artists on the defensive. The facilitator positions herself near the artist so she can meter the artist's sentiments to gauge the degree of intervention appropriate. If the artist is on the defensive, useful dialogue has stopped.

Examples:

Opinionated Question: "Why didn't you use marionettes instead of rod puppets."

(veiled judgment -- "You should have used marionettes/ If it were MY piece, I would have used marionettes")

Neutral Question: "What is the relationship between your choice of rod puppets and the theme of the piece?"

Opinionated Question: "Why didn't you make the piece happier? It bummed me out most of the time and it was too long."

(veiled judgment -- "I don't like the heavy emotional tone of the piece/ if it were MY piece, I would have made it happier")

Neutral Question: "What kind of emotional rhythm would you like the piece to have?"
"How do you think about emotional rhythm when you are scripting your work?"

Opinionated Question: "Why is the second act so long?"

(Veiled judgment - "The second act was too long and I was bored./If it were MY piece, I would have made it shorter.")

Neutral Question: " How long would you like the piece to be and how were you thinking about time in relation to the viewer's experience.?"

4. Permissioned Opinions

If there is an opinion that can't be stated in the form of a neutral question, responders can make recommendations after they have asked permission of the artist. This is an opportunity for positive criticism based on problem-solving techniques. It may seem redundant to ask permission for every single comment; but it gives the artist control of this very sensitive step and affords a moment of mental preparation to both the artist and responder. The artist is allowed to refuse at any time.

Examples:

- "I have a suggestion that might strengthen the moment of the fall. Would you like to hear it?"

- "I have a note about the sculpting of the faces. May I offer it?"

- "Can I make a comment about the scene with the faceless dog? I thought it could be improved if there wasn't as much movement of the tail when he was speaking."

At the conclusion of the session, the facilitator might wind things up with some thank you's to both artist and responders. The facilitator might ask for observations or for either the artist or the responders to summarize the discussion. The artist may be asked "Based on what you have experienced in this session, what's your next step in working on this piece?" If the artist is able to assimilate the information they have received, it is a good way for the responders to understand the value of their input in this delicate adventure.

Note: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, based in the Washington, DC area, presents weekend institutes focused on the Critical Response Process as part of its annual summer institute series, which usually takes place in June.

Representatives of the company are also available to lead trainings in the Process at other sites around the country. There is a new 64 page guide to the Process available from the Dance Exchange for \$20. Information is available on their web site, <www.danceexchange.org> or by contacting John Borstel, Humanities Director at (301) 270-6700 x15