

THE BEST CRITICISM I EVER RECEIVED

By Richard Wolkomir

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After my sophomore year in college, I worked for the summer as a cub reporter at my hometown newspaper. I saw it as a step toward becoming a "literary" person. I was cloudy about what literary meant, but I was sure it involved being a "sophisticate." I was as vague about the meaning of sophisticate as I was about literary, except that I was sure it had a lot to do with being like our newspaper's editor.

He was a genuine literary person, a poet with longish hair, a doleful mustache and sharp blue eyes. His verse appeared in esteemed magazines, and he always had wry, witty comments to make. I wished that I, too, might develop a sharp, superior eye for others' foibles and failings.

That summer's big event was the arrival of an acting troupe, whose young members enthusiastically began transforming a sagging store in a nearby resort hamlet in the Catskill Mountains into a theater. The manager visited our newspaper and explained that the actors were learning four different plays, which they would present alternately. "It's a lot for these kids to get ready," he said worriedly.

Sometimes the editor and I drove over to watch rehearsals. As we slouched in the rear row, he would whisper amusing comments for the performers were still floundering and flubbing. To me, it all seemed delightfully urbane.

Then we would leave the magic of the theater, and I would go back to my real work. It consisted of writing stories on the order of "New Pumper for Volunteer Fire Company." As a blossoming literary person, I yearned to try more colorful material. I wanted to write something that would win my editor's applause. But our village had no chic set whose glittery doings I could report on, only people working hard to pay their rent and buy groceries. Yet we did have the new theater.

A regular reporter would be reviewing the play. I decided to attend opening night even so, and write a review just for the editor to see. Possibly, if my article had sufficient verve and bite, he would run it. But his simple approval would be reward enough.

On opening night the theater was almost full. The people sitting next to me commented on how plucky it was for the troupe to learn four plays and build the theater at the same time.

I waved to our newspaper's official critic. She was a tall, kindly widow who I was sure would write a cheery review. I would fill my review with wry observations and mordantly turned phrases.

Most of the actors were only a bit older than my own 19 years. I sensed that the pretty, dark-haired female lead had the jitters about tonight's performance. It was painful for me as she flubbed her first line. I thought the editor would find it amusing, however, so I made a note.

I also jotted down when the male lead entered the stage from the wrong place. He deftly ad-libbed a few lines that eased the others out of their confusion. But I made no note of that, as it would not lend itself to trenchant prose.

On my way out after the play was over and the standing ovation had died away, I met the regular reviewer. "Isn't it wonderful, a theater like this, right here?" she said. "And the actors are so enthusiastic." I agreed absent-mindedly, preoccupied with the ironic, barbed sentences I was going to write.

I worked late that night, polishing my article. The next day the regular critic's review came out. As I had expected, it was enthusiastic, and she found something to praise in each actor's performance. Finally I handed in what I'd written.

From my desk, I watched the editor glancing over my manuscript. He grinned, leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the desk and gave it his undivided attention. He laughed out loud and then laughed again, more heartily. I felt flushed with excitement, almost giddy. "This is funny -- it has a sharp edge," the editor told me. "I'm going to run this review too." When it appeared the next afternoon, I read it through five times and felt myself filling with the helium of success. I saw a brilliant career ahead of me as a critic, my favor courted, my printed words avidly read.

In that intoxicated state I met the theater manager in front of the five-and-dime. "Well," I said, brimming over with self-congratulation, "how did you like my review?" I'm not sure what I expected him to say. I was young, unsure of myself, and -- just now -- drunk on praise. Surely, he also would be amused by my carefully crafted phrases.

The theater manager's words, simple as they were, hit me like a harpoon. He said, "You hurt a lot of people." The balloon of my self-satisfaction burst. To win the praise for which I hungered, I had blinded myself to how my waspish criticisms would make those actors feel. Standing there on Main Street, I felt a little sick. I braced myself for his anger. Instead, he spoke softly. "You write so well. But you know, all work is difficult, and life is too," he said. "Instead of using whatever abilities we have to tear down, just so we'll look clever or sophisticated, shouldn't we be trying to help one another be excellent?"

That was nearly 25 years ago, but I still see that theater manager whenever I have the urge to criticize somebody else's efforts, whether it is work in an office or the arrangements for a meeting or the decoration of a house. And I think of the review by the newspaper's regular reporter, which gently suggested where the actors might improve, while focusing on what they did well and urging them on to excellence. Perhaps that kindly widow was the true sophisticate.

Not long ago, a man stopped me on the street. "I read your writings from time to time, and I enjoy your positive outlook -- you never seem to knock anyone," he said. Smiling, he added, "I bet that's the best criticism you've ever received."

I thought again of the theater manager. To the man who had just complimented me, I said, "You don't know how much I appreciate that. But no, actually it's the second-best."