

## Roundtable:

# Getting to Know Some of LA's Theatre Editors and Critics

Photos by Chris Kane

On one of those warm, clear-sky autumn mornings sometimes taken for granted in Los Angeles, a few of the leading theatre editors and critics gathered for a tasty lunch at the Off Vine Restaurant in Hollywood to discuss why and how they are attracted to the work they do. They talked about many other things pertaining to local theatre and the reporting on such but we haven't enough pages in this issue to print it all so we will have the second portion in our next issue (March-April 2007).

The panelists included Lisa Fung, Editor of the *Los Angeles Times* Calendar; Dany Margolies, Executive Editor and Critic for *Back Stage West*; Charles McNulty, Chief Theatre Critic for the *Los Angeles Times*; Steven Leigh Morris, Theatre Editor and Critic for *LA Weekly*; Hugo Quintana, Editor and Critic of *La Opinion*; and Don Shirley, Theatre Critic for *City Beat*. Sasha Anawalt, Director of Arts Journalism Fellowship Programs at USC Annenberg School of Communications, moderated.

-Lee Melville

**Anawalt:** I think the best way to think about this is that we're in the tree house, because the readership is very much part of the Los Angeles theatre scene. They know trade talk, so rather than talking to the nation we're talking to each other, primarily for Los Angeles theatre people who work in, act in and run theatres. I think we can look at this as shop talk to a degree so we really are in the tree house. It is really an interesting thing when you get critics together, which I have done before. I run the NEA Institute in Theatre and Musical Theatre and I know a lot of critics and I was one. I think of critics as the thoroughbreds in the newsroom. I don't think just anybody can be a critic. We are the pride of the newsrooms in many situations and there's always a precarious feeling when you're with critics. How much do you reveal and how much do you retain because we try to go into everything with an open mind and not disclose prejudices. What happened when all of a sudden you knew theatre was your passion—your strength? How did that occur because when people read your reviews, they often want to know what makes you able to do this? Charles, what happened that turned you into a critic?

**McNulty:** I did not set out to become a critic. I don't think anyone does. But I did set out to become a writer and the subject of theatre is something I discovered over time. I had the misfortune of coming of age in the '80s and I found it not so easy to find my place. I come from New York. I was in search for something. I think what I was searching for was that inward experience I find in literature, but in a public place. I wanted to have an experience with others that I was finding in the arts but wasn't finding anywhere else in this culture. The writers I most responded to, such as Chekhov, were tapping into something internal and yet public at the same time. That combination of things was something I wanted to be part of. Then I have just enormous respect for the art of acting, for the exposure of those internal parts of ourselves; something I would not be capable of. When I am seeing a performance, I'm having an experience I don't have in any of the other art forms. When it's good, it's more powerful, I think, than any other experience and I just want that experience as much as I

can have it. I transfer my passion into the arts. When I have written something, I want to give an indication of the experience I had in the theatre; I want to give the internal experience. That's why we go to the theatre because we get something we're not getting readily elsewhere in our culture. That's a responsibility we all have and I think we have to figure out how to handle it as best we can, but I don't think that's the inspiration.

**Anawalt:** Dany, how did you become a critic?

**Margolies:** They say agents don't grow up wanting to be agents, and critics don't grow up wanting to be critics, but I was one of those rare kids. I grew up wanting to be a critic. In fact, I grew up wanting to be Martin Bernheimer and then Lewis Segal got the job, and still has the job. When I was in eighth grade I wanted to be a writer and I went to career day and followed a writer around but didn't pursue it, unfortunately, through college and professional career. And years later I was very unhappy in the practice of law, not surprisingly, and was driving into the Valley with a friend of mine who was a staff photographer at the *Malibu Times*, and I said to her, "Doesn't your paper need a dance critic?" and she said, "Yeah, that would be great." Two days later I had my first assignment there so it really is luck and who you know. It wasn't theatre reviewing; it was covering The Pie Festival or something like that. I did a lot of that, but I also got my first assignment which was supposed to be dance; it turned out to be theatre. I had done some acting in high school and a little bit in college. So I thought, well I can try, and I went and I was so filled with thoughts about this first production. That was more than 10 years ago. I remember coming home and just feeling a passion for what I was writing. I have stayed with it all this time. Got a job at *Back Stage West* through a publicist who told then Editor Rob Kendt about me. I also got full-time work there copyediting.

**Anawalt:** Steven?

**Morris:** Well, before I even started writing for the *LA Weekly*, I spent a month in London, and ended up talking at the time to Michael Hastings, who was then the literary manager of the Royal Court Theatre. This was the time when we just had that explosion of activity here, The Olympics Arts Festival, which just really put LA on the map as a



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**I think of critics as the thoroughbreds in the newsroom. I don't think just anybody can be a critic.** -Sasha Anawalt

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culture center. Around that time there was a cover story in *Time*. It was very, very exciting. I was trying to convey that excitement to the Londoners. I still remember these eyes glazing over with, kind of, disbelief, and then they were saying something like, "But aren't you in the film capital of the world? Why would you possibly be interested in theater?" That misconception, which is international, stuck with me. On that same trip I wandered into the office of an editor for *Drama Magazine* and asked if they would be interested in anything from Los Angeles and they said, "We already have somebody from New York." And I said, "Really? Los Angeles is 3,000 miles away. It is a different culture." And they said, "Well, we'll try it. Let's see what happens." I ended up writing for them until they closed. I felt myself becoming an ambassador for a very misunderstood city, and a very complex city. I think that's been one of my guides for why I'm doing this because it does seem thankless on many levels. So then I got hired by the *Weekly* and started freelancing for them and becoming more involved on editorial levels. The city is very complex and, still, it's taken years to fathom the mystery of what the culture is here, and what theatre is and what it serves. Much of the really interesting work is in the smaller theatres and in the laboratories, and the play development centers; it's really exciting. I was in New York recently and I saw *The Little Dog Laughed* with Douglas Carter Beane. The line that got the biggest laugh was from a talent agent in LA. Speaking of a theatre in Los Angeles, she says, "We don't have a problem with cell phones in this town because we just stopped doing theatre all

together." Biggest laugh of the night and here we are again, almost 20 years later, and it just keeps going. Anyone who knows anything about the theatre knows there's an extensive amount of theatre happening in LA. I certainly knew what was here before I arrived. I mean, I never had that sense. So, it's an old joke.

**Anawalt: Lisa? Take it away.**

**Fung:** I never thought I would be an editor of features. I'm a newsperson and actually never thought I'd end up in theatre. I read features. Love features. I went to theatre since I was able to walk, and to dance and to other performing arts; that was always my entertainment. It wouldn't be a vocation. So it was strange, the timing when I decided to switch because I was tech editor during the height of the technology growth and boom. When I left I was probably working 24/7, not able to do anything other than tech. So this job in *Calendar* came up and it was a temporary position. The person who was the arts editor at the time wanted to go back to writing; take a break for a year. To me this was, wow, I could combine what I like to do in my spare time and work at my job instead of having my job be something full time. So that's, kind of, how I ended up there. I think it's the best career move I've made, and I've never looked back.

**Anawalt: Why?**

**Fung:** Because I think you have a little more control over what is important. I mean, you're not so much guided by breaking news events. We have an opportunity with our arts coverage, because we're not so high profile as the entertain-

ment or as tech was during the tech boom, to really present theatre, architecture, art, music, in a way that is more meaningful than having to always cover whatever celebrity is in the news because he was at The Comedy Club. We're able to focus a little differently. That's important, especially a town like LA where you are the second banana to Hollywood.

**Anawalt: Hugo?**

**Quintana:** How did I get into this? My grandmother was a soprano. My mother didn't study, but has a beautiful voice and she started doing Spanish musical theatre in Venezuela. I grew up with that and, finally, we went to Buenos Aires where I went to see my first real play. I was, probably, 15. I was intrigued by the camera so I began writing. I said, "This is what I want to do." I came to Hollywood but only with the idea of directing. I got grants to come here. Writing for the theatre kind of dried out when I left my country. So I did tours as an assistant director, things like that. I went to UCLA, got a Masters in drama. Then I didn't know what to do. I tried to do theatre. I directed a couple of plays in Spanish. I was a teacher in theatre in Spanish but, basically, doors were closed. Then there was this position at *La Opinion*, of editor of entertainment, and I got it just by writing an article. I started there and, of course, jumped into theatre because that's something I knew very well. While I was editing everybody else's articles I went to the theatre and wrote articles myself, and now it is 18 years later.

**Anawalt: Do you cover English speaking theatre?**

**Quintana:** Yes. Mostly. There are very few Spanish-speaking theatres, actually.

**Anawalt: Don.**

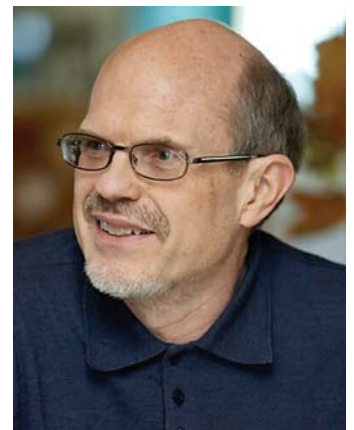
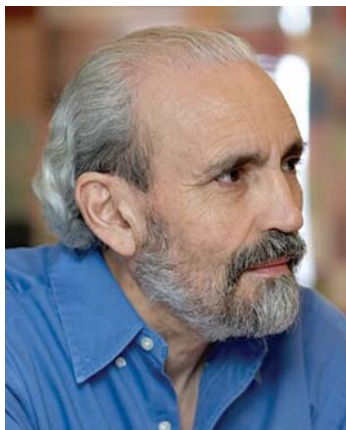
**Shirley:** I was involved in theatre in high school, community theatre. I'm sure all of Mesa, Arizona will never forget my performance as Sir Oliver Surface in *A School for Scandal*. But I soon realized I was better at writing about theatre. I started writing reviews for the *USC Daily Trojan* and during the summers for *The Mesa Arizona Tribune* which my father edited, conveniently enough. My junior year I went to New York. I had a junior year at NYU program. I took a course there from Clive Barnes who was the theatre critic at *The New York Times*. He wrote a letter of recommendation for me which I parlayed a year later into an internship at *The Washington Post*, and I spent six years there. I still wasn't completely theatre dedicated. I was writing about many subjects, movies, television. I was writing for the style section, so I covered parties. So my roots are fundamentally journalistic, but in addition to all the other reasons why I like the theatre, I soon realized the tickets cost a lot more than movie tickets, and it was a much more valuable perk to get into the theatre free than it was to get into the movies. So I went to the O'Neill Center's Critics Institute and that's where I met the wonderful critic Dan Sullivan of the *Los Angeles Times*. A couple of years later I took a job in Los Angeles which was not, again, theatre related; it was a journalism job. It was more about television than theatre but that magazine folded in two years; then I started concentrating on theatre. First I did some reviews for KCRW, then Dan called me and recruited me to do freelance work for the *Times*. I guess it was seven years later when I became the *Times'* theatre person, basically, under the critic level that is.

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-Hugo Quintana

We have an opportunity with our arts coverage because we're not so high profile . . . to focus a little differently. -Lisa Fung

I find when I have to write to a shorter space I have to be a little bit sharper in my thinking and trim out the fat. -Don Shirley



**Anawalt:** I think criticism is something that is almost in your genetic makeup. There's training but also it's a way of living that is a different kind of journalism. Criticism is just different. I think a lot of the people who read reviews don't fully appreciate how fragile and precarious this particular kind of discipline works. What is the value of criticism and why is it important to do what it is you do?

**McNulty:** When you said there's a distinction to what we offer that compares to other writers at a paper, I was wondering what that is. When you were speaking I was thinking, "Journalism is very fast and art isn't, necessarily, very fast." It allows time for contemplation and I think those of us who are responding to you want to also respond with that kind of contemplation. I would like the person who picks up the paper in the morning to read what I'm writing about at a slower pace. That's the fundamental distinction. We are in a culture that wants us to hurry up. The age of the internet has only made this even more of a precarious reality, but the arts and criticism [of it] offer us a moment just to slow down and to take it in. There's a hunger for that. I mean, I hunger for it in the morning when I pick up the paper. I want to feed on other people's experiences. I look at the headlines, but I'm really hungry for something that's beyond the headline. I have deeper experience now, what it means to be here right now, and that's a question that's individual but it's also for the public there to give you both.

**Morris:** Our job is to research and know how a play is structured. I think it's our responsibility to comment on its larger context, to say, okay, this play has a structure that was built a thousand years ago in this particular way because a river flowed through here, but this beam is now decaying. It's not our job just to say, "This house has got pink wallpaper, I don't like pink wallpaper." To do that is terribly trivial and not really why we're here, because anybody can do that.

**Anawalt:** Will newspapers become more important with their thoughtful, considered writing which has not historically been their purpose? Is that something that's a trend or is it happening?

**McNulty:** The opportunity for newspapers lies in analysis. The internet is a place to get updated information, but to get analysis of that information is where the opportunity lies for the newspaper industry. I know each week we're getting *The New Yorker* and when it comes I look forward to it, not that I'm expecting to get some new piece of information but because I'm looking for a commentary for analysis of experience that I don't find elsewhere. Most newspapers like the *LA Times* and *LA Weekly* offer that kind of commentary. I think that's going to expand more and more over the years.

**Anawalt:** Don, do you do a different kind of coverage of Los Angeles theatre?

**Shirley:** Well, my space is much more limited than it ever was at the *LA Times*, and part of me is disturbed about that but part of me welcomes that. I find when I have to write to a shorter space I have to be a little bit sharper in my thinking, and I have to go back over to trim out the fat. *City Beat* has a much younger audience than the *LA Times* and, probably, not as much of a theatregoing audience. So I think in a way my space restrictions are appropriate for what I'm doing. The jury is out as to whether anyone is really that interested in reading longer stories if they're younger than 40, 30. So right now I'm, kind of, happy I'm writing not quite so much in depth.

**Anawalt:** I think what's interesting is that the arts are doing well across the United States, including Los Angeles theatre. In terms of newspaper readership, the Association of American Newspapers says the arts and entertainment section is the third most highly read section of the paper after the front page and the local news section.

**Fung:** At the *LA Times* the front page is read first, then Calendar.

**Anawalt:** I think it has to do with a rapidly growing diversifying demographic. In fact, a Wallace Foundation study done in 2004 found that learning about or celebrating cultural heritage is a major motivation for attendance. Fifty percent of African-Americans and 43 percent of Hispanics go to the theatre because they're motivated to learn about themselves. By contrast, only 15% of Caucasians gave this response. In LA, is there a fairly conscious effort not only on the part of editors but also on the part of theatres to really dig into the population?

**Morris:** But don't you think Calendar is the second most read section primarily because of the people who want to read about the mass media rather than the arts? I mean, that's why there are all those movie ads in Calendar.

**McNulty:** A lot of those individuals are based in LA and they have an interesting local culture. I find when I get e-mails on an article I've done, they don't tend to come from the Hollywood industry. I think we like to make the entertainment industry a thing that isn't a reality. There are individuals who have employment there but they're also part of LA. A lot of people who have nothing at all to do with the entertainment industry are also part of LA. I think that articles about the theatre are locally oriented, and so it's a way to engage in those kinds of issues to feel a part of this place because I think as large as LA is, there is not an official hub.

THIS DISCUSSION WILL CONTINUE IN THE MARCH-APRIL ISSUE OF LA STAGE ■