

Pascall Prize

AUSTRALIAN ‘CRITIC OF THE YEAR’

2009 Acceptance Speech: **Alison Croggon**

I’m delighted and honoured — and not a little surprised — to accept this prize, which puts me in some very distinguished company. Firstly, I’d like to thank the Geraldine Pascall Foundation and the judges. And I’d also like to thank my editors at the Australian, Miriam Cosic and Matthew Westwood, who introduced me to the novel concept of being consulted on changes to my copy.

The other reason I’m grateful to Miriam and Matthew is how understanding they were about my blog, Theatre Notes. I started the blog in 2004 with a conscious decision: that it was to be an aim in itself, not a stepping stone to bigger and brighter things in the mainstream media. When Matthew offered me the job of Melbourne theatre reviewer for the Australian, out of the blue, I realised I really wanted it; at the same time, I knew I couldn’t accept it if it meant changing the blog. I thought I might be the shortest-lived reviewer on record. But the only concession asked of me was that I didn’t preempt my print reviews on the internet.

It means that as a critic I’m in a privileged position: I have an autonomous space for public thinking, as well as a space in the mass media. On my blog, I can extend and explore the ideas and responses that I can only briefly visit in the newspaper. On Theatre Notes, people can disagree with what I say, or extend it further, or correct my mistakes. Criticism becomes more properly what it is: a conversation. It’s this conversation in all its permutations — in magazines and newspapers, in letters columns, at dinner tables, in theatre foyers, on blogs — that makes a culture. Without it, we just have a lot of art.

I know there’s much dark talk about the future of arts criticism. And rightly so: over the past decade we’ve seen space for arts in the daily press continually eroded, and the impact of the internet on the traditional mass media is still to be fully felt. And no one yet has worked out how to make the internet sustainable. Arts coverage in the digital age faces unprecedented challenges.

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Alison Croggon

But I also see some sparkles in the gloom. There are a lot of smart young bloggers in Australia, hungrily seeing art and responding to it. And artists themselves are vocal in demanding more and better responses to their work. The internet has stepped into the breach. *Theatre Notes* was the first theatre blog in Australia, but these days it's by no means the only one. Melbourne in particular has a rich and lively culture of theatre blogging. This prize means a lot to me in many ways, but a major reason is that it demonstrates conclusively that blogging is not just the province of bored teens. And I hope it will encourage not only me, but the talented younger critics I see developing around me. They need encouraging. As we all know, criticism is no easy career choice. It sometimes feels thankless, and it requires the skin of a Sherman tank.

Lastly, I'd like to thank the people whose work I've reviewed over the years. The great poet Eugenio Montale once published a book of critical writings called *The Secondary Art*. It strikes me as a beautiful description of criticism. Criticism is a responsive activity; it wouldn't exist if there were no art to discuss in the first place, and a critic must always remember this humbling fact. On the other hand, it is also an art. A critic is a writer, and is beholden to the demands of writing well. I am the sort of critic who believes that my first duty is not to artists, not to audiences, but to the art itself. That duty includes not bringing the art of writing into disrepute.

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All the same, criticism never feels adequate. Each review is, as Eliot said of poetry, "*a different kind of failure*". There are always better ways to speak about art, there is always more to learn. Perhaps that's why we keep doing it.