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# From discussion leader to consumer guide: A century of theater criticism in Chicago newspapers

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## From Discussion Leader to Consumer Guide

### A Century of Theater Criticism in Chicago Newspapers

*This article completes a three-part examination of theater critics working for Chicago newspapers during the twentieth century. The first article in the series covered the "boomtown" period leading up to World War I, and the second article addressed Chicago's rise after 1960 as a regional center for theater covered by fewer newspapers and fewer critics. This article reviews those periods but emphasizes the middle, "road town" period, which saw a gradually dwindling band of critics functioning as quality control experts, passing judgment on New York road shows. After examining that period, this article uses commodification to consider the changing role of the critic over the entire century. It concludes that while commodification is a useful concept to understand vast changes in the critical landscape, it is neither an irresistible nor an inevitable force.*

While New York has long been America's theatrical capital, and its critics, therefore, have occupied a preeminent position, more theater is performed, and far more theater criticism is written, in the nation's various regional centers, beginning with the original Second City, Chicago.<sup>1</sup> Previous studies by this author have focused on Chicago critics at the beginning of the twentieth century and toward the end, revealing vastly different environments for theater and for those who have reviewed it for a living. This article explores how Chicago criticism traversed the historical landscape from point A to point B, considering how changes in the worlds of theater and journalism may have affected each other. That exploration will inform speculation about what the current century may hold and the extent to which the experience of the Chicago critics might be expected to be reflected in critics, theater artists, and readers in the nation's other major regional centers outside New York.

A 2001 study noted the difficulty of positioning new research

on American critics within the traditions of intellectual, social, or cultural history.<sup>2</sup> Intellectual history is appropriate for the occasional thought-leader (such as art critic Clement Greenberg) but not for the larger critical community taken as a group.<sup>3</sup> Social history goes too far in the other direction to be of use, concentrating on broad social classes. Not surprisingly, the 2001 study found cultural history to be the most appropriate of the three but noted that the definition of culture followed by most researchers ("a particular way of life," as Raymond Williams put it in *Keywords*<sup>4</sup>) seems to push to the periphery the arts and their critics. Even so, cultural history—though not necessarily *cultural studies*, which tends to focus on popular culture (a problematic term in its own right)—was seen as the most promising basis for research on critics. Readers interested in exploring that literature are directed to the 2001 study; although the current study relies on that context, there is no need to repeat that literature review.<sup>5</sup>

Since this article will consider broader issues, and to divine (or construct) the meaning of a century of theater reviewing, a more exacting theoretical tool is needed. Without wielding the totality of critical theory, much less the Marxism that spawned it, this study borrows one key concept from that tradition: commodification. Simply put, it posits that in a capitalist society all human activity tends over time to lose its intrinsic value and be replaced by purely a monetary market value. In other words, commerce eventually overwhelms culture, and the inevitable result is to progressively cheapen human creations. Cheapen might be a loaded term in this context; the word is used here merely to convey the idea that the impulse to cash in on



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human creation raises its monetary value only by lowering its true value.<sup>6</sup> As Bob Dylan put it, "Money doesn't talk. It swears."

One does not need to tie commodification to a critique of capitalism to see its value as a defining principle of cultural activity. If one creates something out of love or divine inspiration, and then finds that others might want or need this thing, it is natural to offer it to others in exchange for something else, either in barter or for cash. Only the wealthy can afford to give away everything they create.<sup>7</sup> For the current purpose, it matters not whether commodification is a concept constructed by Marxists from scratch, was discovered as an essential flaw of capitalism, or is a phenomenon endemic to most if not all social systems.<sup>8</sup> What matters is whether the concept has either predictive or explanatory powers when it is brought to bear on the topic at hand.

How does the history of working theater critics in the twentieth century look when viewed through this lens? It soon becomes clear that the topic is not just *one* commodity—*theater criticism*—but the interplay of two commodities: theater and the media. Considering just one half of the equation—the history of theater in Chicago—leads to a division of three main periods: boomtown, road town, and regional center.<sup>9</sup> As the first and third periods were times of intense local production, and the middle period saw local stages dominated by shows imported from (or headed to) New York, one might easily make the assumption that by the end of the century criticism in Chicago had come full circle. In one sense it had. At the end of the century, critics once again devoted most of what they wrote to local products.

When one puts theater history aside, however, and looks at a century of media developments, it appears the situation has changed considerably. Whereas in 1900 there were a dozen newspapers, each with a theater critic, by the end of the century there were just two downtown dailies, and, according to a 2002 study, only one of them had significant influence over the arts.<sup>10</sup> A complete picture of theater criticism in Chicago—and, by implication, other regional centers—requires that one look not only at the development of theater but the steadily dwindling number of critics covering it.

This article will proceed chronologically through the three theatrical periods, concentrating on the middle period, which was not covered by the two earlier studies. As with these studies, the main source will be the thousands of reviews written by Chicago daily newspaper critics. These are readily available on microfilm, although it is a rather tedious process to find them, buried as they are on the inside pages. An acknowledged limitation of this method is the exclusion of weekly newspapers, magazines, broadcast stations, and the ethnic press.

Chicago's boomtown period began in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continued until around World War I. During this time the city grew, built theaters, saw those theaters consumed by a series of fires both before and after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and saw them always rise again. Theater, commerce, and the media were closely linked from the beginning of this city on the lake. The first performance for money in Chicago took place on February 24, 1834, and was advertised in the thirteenth issue of Chicago's first newspaper, the weekly *Democrat*. The entertainment was offered by a Mr. Bowers, *Professeur de tours Amusant* (professor of amusing turns) in a private home. A magician and a fire eater, he managed to complete his performance without burning down the house.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the wholesale loss of the main theater district in the 1871 fire, the most devastating single fire was the one that consumed

the Iroquois theater and killed 600 matinee patrons in 1903, leading to the temporary shuttering of all of the theaters in town and the seventy-year imposition of severely restrictive fire codes in theater buildings in Chicago. The eventual lifting of these codes was a crucial element in the resurgence of theater in Chicago in the latter third of the century.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the century, most of the city's dozen newspapers were just beginning to give bylines to their critics, so it is a convenient time to begin considering their impact. A circulation war that began in the 1890s continued in 1900 with the first edition (on the Fourth of July) of William Randolph Hearst's *Chicago American*. This introduced Chicago to a vigorous style of journalism marked by frequent editions, many illustrations, huge headlines, colors, more comics, serial fiction, signed articles, and trust-busting. Although the *American* employed a variety of ill-prepared freelance theater critics, its emphasis on features coverage broadened the definition of journalism in the city and most likely spurred more complete arts coverage by competitors.<sup>13</sup>

As the 2001 study points out, the combination of plentiful theater and expanding arts coverage in ten daily newspapers made this a golden age for Chicago drama critics, who were in an enviable position. They introduced important issues to readers. Because their job was to provide criticism, they inevitably not merely passed judgment on purely theatrical matters, but they *framed* the issues within and attending the plays. And, because there were so many critics and they were in a competitive situation (notwithstanding the clear leadership in circulation of the *Tribune*), they often disagreed with each other in print, sometimes naming each other in attacks that approached the personal. While individual critics had peculiarities and deficiencies, as a group they functioned in a way that modern critics rarely do: they were discussion leaders.

There was no competition from broadcast; readers were encouraged to read multiple editions, or more than one newspaper. Even if there was some segmentation of audiences, with ten newspapers in town, there was more than one for each class. So patrons of the theater could draw on a multiplicity of critical voices and interpretations. In this environment, individual productions were less likely to be approached by the public as settled commodities, good or bad, worth consuming or not. Seeing that a variety of published critics held numerous views encouraged patrons to view plays as open texts that they were free to interpret for themselves.

Three controversies rose to prominence in this period: the new "problem plays" of European critics such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw; the monopolistic advances of the New York theatrical Syndicate, and the Little Theater movement. The most compelling controversy to today's readers was the one surrounding the plays of Ibsen, which, although they were written about twenty years earlier, were just being introduced to mainstream Chicago audiences (theater historians will note that Ibsen's *Ghosts* had its world premiere in Chicago in Norwegian in 1882). Perhaps because the women's suffrage movement was largely ignored in the news columns of these newspapers, the critique of women's role in society offered by Ibsen in such plays as *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler* was received by many critics with shock and dismay. Only two Chicago critics consistently defended him.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after his death in 1906, he somehow made the transformation from immoral European to master dramatist; but, while the controversy lasted, it provided the best single example of open debate among critics of the period.

Commodification was at the heart of the controversy surrounding the New York Syndicate. Formed in 1896, the Syndicate mass produced theater and distributed it by rail to America's major metro-

politan markets. The most popular dramatic vehicles of the day were what have been dubbed machine plays: scenery-heavy spectacles of heavenly ascensions and battles at sea. By shipping expensive scenery from city to city, the Syndicate was able to increase its return on investment and make a profit from the public's increasing taste for flash over substance (a good example of the cheapening influence of commodification).<sup>15</sup>

The final major controversy of this period involved the Little Theaters, a nationwide movement led by several earnest art theaters in Chicago for about ten years, beginning around 1906 with the founding of the New Theater. These companies eschewed glossy professionalism, preferring serious realistic plays by Europeans and progressive American writers. With mixed critical support, these theaters folded one by one. Mass produced entertainment prevailed on two fronts: in the glitzy, scenery-driven confections of the Syndicate (and subsequent touring conglomerates like the Shuberts) and in the technological wonders of film, radio, and, eventually, television.

In the middle period—roughly bounded by World War I and the second Eisenhower administration, which began in 1957—the transition from boomtown to road town was gradual. Throughout its theatrical history, Chicago always offered a mix of local and imported productions, and local efforts did not disappear overnight. Further blurring the boundaries is the fact that the careers of some critics overlapped periods.

Perhaps the best example of a journalist whose criticism spanned theatrical epochs was Ashton Stevens. Born in 1871, he found his ultimate career by a roundabout route. As a young man he was forced to give up studying law to make money for his family in Kansas by giving lessons on the banjo, an instrument he played all of his life. One pupil, the editor of the *News Letter*, a San Francisco literary weekly, took twenty-two-year-old Stevens to a concert, was impressed by his comments, and hired him to write criticism of theater. Not long after, he replaced Bret Harte as editor of the *Overland Weekly*. A chance meeting on the Oakland-San Francisco ferry with Hearst led to lifelong employment as a theater critic for Hearst newspapers: the *San Francisco Examiner*, 1898-1908; the *New York Evening Journal*, 1908-1910; and, until his death in 1951, Hearst's ever-shifting foothold in Chicago, beginning with the *Examiner* in 1910.<sup>16</sup>

Stevens worked in a time when critics could hobnob with stars and still command authority in print. In San Francisco, he befriended one of the greats of the time by writing, "Dull people don't like Mrs. Fiske's acting,"<sup>17</sup> and he carried on a protracted feud with actor-manager Richard Mansfield. In Chicago, he predicted the success of Orson Welles, the bright fifteen-year-old who lived across the street.<sup>18</sup> In his 1944 biography of John Barrymore, Gene Fowler interviewed Stevens about his old friend, the once great actor who came to a boozy end on Chicago's stages. Fowler described Stevens, "this sagacious dean of the drama critics," in admiring terms:

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***"Ashton Stevens was  
the only critic in Chicago  
whose headlines frequently  
featured his name in large  
thirty-six to forty-eight point  
type: 'Ashton Stevens  
says . . . ' or 'Ashton Stevens  
sees Great Acting in . . .'  
True, this may have been  
due partly  
to the bombastic  
Hearst style, but Stevens  
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[A]lthough Mr. Stevens never coddled an inferior performance, he smeared no poison on his critical darts. He brought a gay creativeness to his task, a voice clearly heard, yet so unlike the iconoclastic snarls of those who grow violently wise after a last night's event. He became celebrated in the three cities of his critical ministrations, San Francisco, New York and Chicago, as "the mercy killer."<sup>19</sup>

Stevens was the only critic in Chicago whose headlines frequently featured his name in large thirty-six to forty-eight point type: "Ashton Stevens says . . ." or "Ashton Stevens sees Great Acting in . . ." True, this may have been due partly to the bombastic Hearst style, but Stevens usually managed to justify the fanfare. Although Chicago's art theater movement was in mid-swing when he arrived, he was not a major player in that critical controversy.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that he was an unusually positive critic, coupled with the evidence that theater in Chicago declined steadily during his long career there (from 1910 into the 1950s), suggests the limitations of a critic's influence.

In 1947, the *Chicago Stagebill Yearbook* reported that there were nine legitimate theaters in operation, up from four in the late 1930s but down from twenty three in 1922.<sup>21</sup> One major exception to this decline was the construction of the Kenneth Sawyer Goodman Memorial Theater in the fall of 1925. Under the direction of Thomas Wood Stevens, the Goodman originally featured performances by a company made up of students, former students, and teachers of the theater department of the Art Institute, to which the Goodman was both physically and institutionally attached. At the time many compared its serious purpose to that of New York's Theatre Guild, although it was less clear that the Goodman was a fully professional operation.

While the Goodman received the full critical treatment, critics often made references to the actors' amateur or semi-professional status. On at least one occasion a Goodman production required the services of a professional press agent, Samuel Putnam, who wrote an indignant letter to the editor of the *Post* when the *Tribune* compared the Goodman to the "little theater movement" of the previous decade. Putnam evidently did not share that movement's distrust of commercialism: "I fear . . . that my days of amateur dramatics are over. I have a living to make, and I should be surprised to discover myself associated with any venture that did not imply shekels in the till (and in my own pocket)."<sup>22</sup>

In his "Behind the Scenes" column, Stevens credited Putnam with generating great publicity for the 1926 U.S. premiere of Georg Kaiser's *Gas*, a production that, in retrospect, seems to have demanded extensive coverage on its own merits.<sup>23</sup> *Gas* was directed in the style of "constructivism" by Marion Gering, who was associate director of the Meyerhold Theater in Moscow. The Goodman Publicity Scrapbook in the Special Collections Department of the Chicago Public Library contains numerous pre-play clippings on this anti-realistic production. The *Post* alone had stories on the costumes, the unusual setting, and the director, all under different bylines. The scrapbook's

collected reviews of *Gas* provide an interesting perspective on the range of critical approaches at the time (all of the reviews were labeled appearing on January 28, 1926, except for Amy Leslie's, which appeared in the *Daily News* two days later).

Stevens said the play was not as gripping as Karel Capek's *R.U.R.*, and complained that the cacophony of industrial machines on stage drowned out the dialogue. "Trick scenery soon loses its thrill," he wrote. Despite his reputation for gentle criticism, he was not content to let the play thrive and continued to slam it in follow-up stories. With this production one begins to form a more complete picture of Stevens as a somewhat star-struck critic who was educated on well-made realistic plays—and was quite adept at responding to them on deadline—but failed to see that different kinds of plays require different expectations (similar observations will be made of some of the critics of the third period). In his defense, he had far less exposure to non-realistic styles than his critical descendants would have fifty years later.

The reviews of *Gas* were mixed. The *Tribune* notice, signed "F.D." (for Frederick Donaghey, presumably), termed the play "forum stuff"—that is, more a debate than a play—but "interesting" nonetheless. Leslie made clear that she liked *Gas*, calling it "a tremendously thrilling symphony of disaster." The *Post's* C.J. Bulliet began by calling the play "half-baked," not because he thought it went too far but because it did not go far enough in its departure from past forms. He applauded those aspects of constructivism that were furthest removed from realism. The *Variety* notice, signed "Hal," seemed designed to offend the locals: "Chicago is still too much of a backwoods town to care much for dramatized pamphlets on capital and labor. . . . Chicago is primitive and goes to the theatre to be amused."<sup>24</sup> While Hal himself (or herself) had nothing positive to say about *Gas*, primitive Chicago seemed to embrace the play; it drew standing room crowds to an extended run.

While Hal's argument about *Gas* may have been flawed, he or she was not the only one speaking of Chicago as a second-rank theater town. *Gas* received financial support from a new organization called the Chicago Play Producing Company. Its founding president, Arthur Bissell, was interviewed in the *News* on December 30, 1926, and declared (in the reporter's paraphrase), "The drama is and always has been in a bad way in Chicago." His solution to the problem anticipated the regional revolution by forty years. "The theater needs decentralization," he said. "Why should New York continue as the one great American center of good plays?" He went on to argue that theater, like music and art, deserved philanthropic support and should not be left solely in the hands of commercial interests. Five days later, the *News* interviewed Goodman director Thomas Wood Stevens, who also argued for decentralization. He called for the creation in Chicago of a subsidized theater along the lines of the *Comedie Francaise* in Paris.<sup>25</sup>

In a retrospective piece on 1926 published on New Year's Eve, *News* writer Margaret Mann Crolus took issue with the negative tone of other theater commentators, declaring "there never has been a time when Chicago could look back at a year of greater achievement than at present." Her evidence included the following: many commercial plays had begun in Chicago before flopping in New York ("but that was New York's lack of taste"); the Goodman was thriving in its second year; Mrs. Samuel Insull had begun a promising Repertoire Theater stock company doing new plays at the Studebaker; there were two other stock companies in operation doing less ambitious fare; the Theater Intime in the Fine Arts Building had scheduled a production in which Ivan Lazarooff of the Moscow Art Theater would direct the Chicago Laboratory Theater; and the Chicago Play

Producing Company had plans to do a Eugene O'Neill premiere, *Lazarus Laughed*. As a footnote, she mentioned what she apparently thought of as a sub-class of theatrical activity: "On the near north side a little theater group puts on daring and sometimes revolutionary plays, going so far as to do *Mrs. Warren's Profession*. But of the neighborhood groups there have been and are an endless number. All have had their influence on the city's dramatic taste and growth."<sup>26</sup> Under the heading "Stage Attractions for Coming Week," a story appearing in the *News* on February 4, 1927, listed twenty-six attractions, ten of them Vaudeville, and three of them one-women presentations (Ruth Draper, Ina Claire, and Mrs. Fiske).<sup>27</sup>

Whether the theater of Chicago in the mid-twenties is to be deemed a boom or a bust, history tells us it was headed for trouble, soon to meet the double challenges of talking pictures and the Depression. It was into this environment that Chicago's most famous critic began her career by writing short but pithy reviews for the *Journal of Commerce*.

The earliest Claudia Cassidy review found was of a Goodman production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1926. The *Tribune's* Frederick Donaghey raved (for a mere six inches), and the *Post's* R.A. Lennon blandly opined in a four-inch review that "the effect was happy." In another four-inch review, Virginia Dale of the *Journal* chatted that the play had "much charm." The *Herald Examiner* gave Ashton Stevens seven inches, which he used in characteristic fashion: "[O]nly the loophound boob will miss seeing this joyous production." In less space than any of them (barely three inches), Cassidy managed to give a more complete picture of the various aspects of the production. In the process, she displayed flashes of the bruising wit that would mark her work for half a century: "[T]he occasional intrusion of sheer amateurishness is but another reason for mirth. If at times the proceedings verge on the typical class play of Podunk, they are nevertheless, and possibly because, quite uproarious."

It would be many years before Cassidy would become the acknowledged leader of Chicago's critical community. As local theatrical expectations shrank in response to talking pictures and the Depression, the critics on Chicago's major newspapers were reduced to squabbling over such things as what role Katharine Cornell should play next. Ashton Stevens recommended *Hedda Gabler*, Lloyd Lewis, who had succeeded Leslie at the *Daily News*, recommended the lead from an old chestnut called *Romance*; and the *Tribune's* Charles Collins recommended *Lady Macbeth*. All were dissatisfied with Cornell's choice, the title role in *Dishonored Lady*.<sup>28</sup>

Collins, though not previously noted in this limited examination of Chicago's critical history, had a long journalistic career. He joined the *Record-Herald* as a reporter upon graduation from the University of Chicago in 1903 and covered the Iroquois Theater fire in his first year. In 1908, he became drama critic for the *Inter Ocean*. When it folded in 1914, he moved to the *Evening Post*, where he served as drama critic until 1925, at which point he quit to write adventure stories and light musical comedy. From 1930 until 1938, he was the *Tribune's* drama critic, and for the next decade, he was a columnist, feature writer, and author of the "100 Years Ago Today" column. He died in 1964.<sup>29</sup>

Cassidy, meanwhile, moved to the *Sun* in 1941 and to the *Tribune* in 1942. The role of the *Tribune* theater critic was already the dominant one in Chicago's critical community when she stepped in; the combination of her forceful writing and the fading fortunes of other newspapers increased that dominance markedly. Born in Shawneetown in extreme southern Illinois and educated at the University of Illinois, the "Medusa of the Mid-West," as she was termed

in the headline of a 1951 *Theatre Arts* profile, wielded a power over the box office unparalleled in the history of Chicago theater.<sup>30</sup> In a 1956 profile, also in *Theatre Arts*, Ward Morehouse quoted "a Chicago showman," who apparently did not want his name used, regarding Cassidy:

She's tough as hell, her standards are high, and she generally scares hell out of actors and producers. But she's a wonderful person to have on your side when she likes a play, and she's been known to like a few. Playgoers who read the *Chicago Tribune* follow her verdicts and depend upon them. She gets people into a theater. Her enthusiasms have the effect of those of the late Alexander Woollcott; she has frequently turned a seeming flop into a smash hit.<sup>31</sup>

The most celebrated instance of Cassidy positively affecting a play was her championing of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, which was coolly received by Chicago when it opened in 1944 starring Laurette Taylor. She began her crusade with a positive review and kept browbeating her readers with stories on the play until attendance grew, giving America's greatest playwright his first success in the theater.<sup>32</sup>

And yet, Cassidy is best known as a killer of plays. Richard Gehman argued in 1951 that this was to her credit, since most plays at the time deserved to be killed:

The great majority of critics, bombarded as they are continually by mediocrity which would have been unbelievable to reviewers of fifty or even twenty years ago, have suffered a gradual decline in taste and have allowed their standards to relax. Miss Cassidy has somehow managed to keep her sights as high as they were in the beginning of her career; she has never become indulgent or coddling toward the second-rate.<sup>33</sup>

Cassidy was famous for roasting productions that offered performers who did not measure up to the original Broadway stars. Some producers charged that she would criticize *any* change in cast. In *The Critics*, Lehman Engel countered that charge with evidence that Cassidy praised new casts in productions of *La Plume de ma Tante* and *Toys in the Attic*.<sup>34</sup>

In retrospect, it is easy to cast Cassidy as the champion of good theater and her detractors as the defenders of mediocrity. In many cases, perhaps most, this was no doubt the case. And yet there seems to be some truth to the complaint that to Cassidy, art was either perfect or perfectly dreadful. Sixteen years after *The Glass Menagerie*, Cassidy called Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana* "bafflingly bad," and compared it unfavorably to the play she had championed, revealing that her artistic ideals left little room for the flawed but still commendable piece of work.<sup>35</sup> High ideals protect the public from bad art; very high ideals protect the public from good art.

Cassidy covered theater, opera, music, and dance for the *Tribune* full time until 1965, after which she began a freelance career, producing pieces for such publications as the Chicago Lyric Opera edition of *Stagebill*. Her impact on her era was great, as was the legacy she left the

working critics who followed her. No doubt the power of her voice, combined with the circulation dominance of the *Tribune* and the gradual disappearance of much of the competition, helped establish that newspaper as the one widely acknowledged to matter most to patrons of theater.<sup>36</sup>

The role of Chicago critics in this period becomes more evident when compared to New York critics. That city's position as the capital of American theater put local newspaper drama critics in an enviable position, and a number of them achieved considerable fame in this period. Newspaper critics of note included Woollcott, Percy Hammond (who moved from the *Chicago Tribune* to the *New York Times* in 1908),

Burns Mantle, Brooks Atkinson, and Walter Kerr. National magazine critics based in New York at this time included George Jean Nathan, Stark Young, Harold Clurman, Eric Bentley, Robert Benchley, and Brendan Gill.<sup>37</sup> Eventually, Broadway productions came to earn more income on the road than in New York, but while New York was considered both the factory and the main market for theater in the United States, its critics were afforded status unavailable to critics in other American cities.

While New York has never stopped sending (and trying out) productions to Chicago and other road stops, the sixties and early seventies saw the emergence of the regional theater movement, which began in various small ways and proliferated phenomenally, to the point that it came to dominate local arts pages. Major credit for this goes to the theater artists, most of whom were young and, in the early years, lived poor and created theater on the cheap, gradually building audience demand. But there is reason to believe that the critical community in Chicago played a significant role in three ways:

1. Leading the boosterish, anti-New York battle cry.
2. Leading the campaign to repeal the fire codes.
3. Championing the style of theater favored by the Off-Loop theaters.

From the beginning of the century, in pieces railing against the New York Syndicate, Chicago critics voiced local resentment toward the imperialism of the New York theater. Even after the New York producers had won the battle and were the source of most of the theater reviewed by Chicago critics, the frequent charges by Cassidy that New York was sending inferior casts fed that long-standing resentment. Audiences were primed to prefer local efforts, even before such efforts were forthcoming.

Although the regional theater movement in Chicago traces its beginnings to the Second City improvisational troupe in the late fifties and the Hull House theater of the early sixties, its expansion was curbed by the difficulty of finding cheap performing spaces that the city fire marshal would allow to stay open. Glenna Syste of the *Sun-Times* wrote a series of commentaries that prodded the city council to overturn the fire codes (which, as the reader will recall, dated back to the Iroquois Theater fire of 1903). That, in turn, led to a spate of new theaters.

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Finally, one must consider the tireless championing of the Off Loop movement by Richard Christiansen, beginning in the early sixties at the *Daily News* and continuing through the end of the century after he became chief critic of the *Tribune* in 1980. The second article in this series, covering the end of the century, contained a detailed argument for the influence of Christiansen, concluding that while there were other critics in Chicago who had interesting things to say, it was his vision of theater that prevailed, mostly for the better, and his voice that mattered. The gist of that argument is that from the beginning of the sixties, well before the so-called "Chicago style" had asserted itself, Christiansen presented a clear aesthetic that lined up neatly with the salient aspects of that style; moreover, he moved to the *Tribune* at a crucial moment in Chicago's theatrical development, and that style subsequently flourished just as other types of theater failed to gain a foothold.

Just as Christiansen's self-effacing personality and writing style prevented his emergence as the kind of dominating celebrity critic that one often finds in New York, it obscured his true impact as a gardener who nourished certain types of theater and weeded out others. The happy side of this equation was that Chicago came to have a recognizable style: muscular, raw, actor-dominated naturalism, gripping in its impact if somewhat anti-intellectual and thin when it came to pre-modern classics and post-modern, anti-realistic work. It is a package for which most regional theater centers would be happy to trade up.<sup>36</sup> Again, the credit for the actual theatrical work goes to those energetic folk at Steppenwolf, the Organic, Victory Gardens, Northlight, the Goodman, and the 100 or so little theaters that fill the calendar pages on any particular Friday. But there is considerable evidence that critical contributions were certainly important contributing factors.

The idea of commodification found its way into the discussion of the boomtown and road town periods. How might it inform analysis of the century's final period? Looking just at newspapers, it is impossible to separate the arts pages from the fate of the papers at large. Critics have their own strengths and weaknesses, and their own devoted readers, but they are tied to the health and reach of the newspapers for which they work. When the *Daily News* died, Christiansen was its drama critic, and its arts pages were widely admired, but one must presume that the paper lost subscribers and advertisers for reasons other than its arts coverage. If he had been gobbled up by the *Tribune* well before the decline of the *Daily News*, one might be able to see that as the predatory cannibalization of one commodity by another. Instead, the *Daily News* collapsed, and the *Tribune* picked up Christiansen as an available talent. To make a case for the power of commodification in the development of the newspaper scene in the last half of the twentieth century, one would have to look at factors beyond the arts pages. At risk of oversimplification, though, as the century progressed, one newspaper, the *Tribune*, gradually increased its dominance in the Chicago market, and, in part because of its attention to the arts, gained a monopoly over upper-middle class and upper-class readers, who were valued by most commercial advertisers (including the theater).

Turning to the theater, one could make the case that commodification was evident in the movement of successful local theater groups such as Steppenwolf to ever-larger theaters, bigger budgets, and slickly produced advertising campaigns. Steppenwolf and some of its fellows became *brands*, evident on t-shirts and other tangible souvenirs of a night at the theater. The initially quirky, low-budget productions with high intrinsic value, but little or no money left over at the end of the season, were replaced by well-advertised, high-budget affairs in which the formerly unknown kids from Illi-

nois State became names worthy of putting on a marquee: Gary Sinise! Joan Allen! John Malkovich! And sometimes, right next to those names, you would find Christiansen's, together with a few choice adjectives from his review.

Well, that's advertising, but is it commodification? And whatever you call it, is it progress or the kind of degeneration of intrinsic value that commodification predicts?

There are several answers to this. As theater prices rise, the role of the critic as a mere consumer guide is increased, and his or her contributions as a discussion leader dwindle. Moreover, the fact that there is one theater critic in Chicago whose opinions affect product is something that even that critic would not want. Looking simply at theater, one might see cause for hope, however. It could be argued that a local product with high intrinsic value finally won the day. The glossy machine plays trucked in from New York no longer dominate the scene. Good has won; evil has been cut down to size. Yes, commodification happens. It always has. But the human spirit fights back.

Yet that argument works best when the purview is limited to the theater and its critics—and even there it is a shaky argument at best, given the dwindling number of newspapers that hire critics and the near-total abandonment of theater criticism by broadcast. What happens, however, when the purview is expanded to include the larger picture of entertainment and its critics in the twentieth century? In 1900, when a Chicagoan went looking for entertainment, he or she could read ten newspaper critics heatedly debating a wide variety of productions, local and imported, classic and contemporary, serious and light. Within a few decades, the great bulk of these theaters—especially the neighborhood theaters that offered work to stock companies—had been replaced or taken over by projectors showing mass produced entertainment filmed on Hollywood lots. By the end of the century, even those movie houses were closing as people stayed home to watch television or pop a DVD into a machine. Fewer critics were working, and far fewer actors were working. Criticism had devolved from an open debate among peers to a single voice that was less of an invitation to explore a text than it was a pronouncement on what was worth buying. And even that voice had shrunk to near irrelevance: As any studio executive will tell you, a good advertising campaign applied to a property that has assembled the right mix of name-brand actors will ensure profitability in the first few weekends, eliminating the need for critical approval.

No doubt there is much more that can and should be said about the development of theater criticism in the twentieth century. But commodification allows historians to organize and understand many of the developments in this field, even if it does not quite have the final word on the future of culture in America. One cannot deny that serious local artists managed to stake out high ground in Chicago in the final decades of the twentieth century. A quick glance at the recent rise of independents in the film and music recording industries suggests that there is hope in the electronic realm as well.

Perhaps, finally, what may be said about commodification is that it is a powerful force in society that will dominate culture if it is allowed. But if dedicated artists and determined critics can wean audiences away from the addictive banalities of mass-produced culture, there is hope. At present, the weakest link in the chain appears to be the lack of respected outlets for arts journalists. Perhaps if the web develops local sites that offer a variety of recurring critical voices, that may come to supplement the dwindling number of newspaper critics, and there again will be the rise of an atmosphere of equal and open critical discussion. In any case, increased awareness of critical

history should encourage recognition that the situation is not static; what sometimes feels like a dead end might turn out to be a living beginning.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With the 2000 census, Chicago fell behind Los Angeles in population.  
<sup>2</sup> Scott Fosdick, "Chicago Newspaper Theater Critics of the Early Twentieth Century," *Journalism History* 27, 3 (Fall 2001): 122-28.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of this kind of intellectual history is Les Roka's consideration of the critical writings of composer Virgil Thomson. See Les Roka, "More Than a Modest Subculture: Virgil Thomson's 'Nearly Perfect' Music Criticism," *Journalism History* 26, 2 (Summer 2000): 50.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 76-82.

<sup>5</sup> Fosdick, "Chicago Newspaper Theater Critics of the Early Twentieth Century," 122-28.

<sup>6</sup> See Hanno Hardt, *Critical Communication Studies: Communication, History and Theory in America* (London: Routledge, 1992), 139-41. For definitions of commodification, see Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 4th ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 96, 492.

<sup>7</sup> As one becomes more adept at creating things that others want or need, others are likely to offer more in return. So, in a needy world it is a natural process for the trade value of something to grow to challenge the initial value, the joy of creation. And as one turns attention away from the muse and toward the market, creativity is replaced by an assembly line mentality. Capitalism might have perfected this process, but it did not invent it. As an example, consider the words of a seventeenth-century samurai warrior, Miyamoto Musashi, who was author of *The Book of Five Rings*, trans. Thomas Cleary (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993). If the translation is an accurate one, Musashi anticipated Marx, Lukacs, and the Frankfurt School: "As I see society, people make the arts into commercial products; they think of themselves as commodities, and also make implements as items of commerce. . . . The field of martial arts is particularly rife with flamboyant showmanship, with commercial popularization and profiteering on the part of both those who teach the science and those who study it." See page 6.

<sup>8</sup> It might be argued that a true Islamic state, with its rejection of the materialism inherent in both Marxism and capitalism, would see artists creating solely for the greater glory of Allah, without thought of recompense, and that commodification would cease to manifest itself.

<sup>9</sup> Scott Fosdick, "Chicago," in Don B. Wilmet and Tice L. Miller, eds., *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 107.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Fosdick, "Newspaper Critic Shapes Chicago Style of Theater," *Newspaper Research Journal* 23, 2-3 (Spring/Summer 2002): 114-28.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Fosdick, "The Press on Chicago Theater: Influencing an Emergent Style" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1991), 51-52. Bowers' first name was not mentioned.

<sup>12</sup> Fosdick, "Chicago," 106.

<sup>13</sup> Wilma Jane Dryden, "Chicago Theatre as Reflected in the Newspapers,

1900 through 1904" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Lyman B. Glover of the *Times-Herald* (later the *Record-Herald*), Major George McConnel of the *Chronicle*, Barrett Eastman of the *Evening Journal*, and Amy Leslie of the *Daily News* led the moralistic charge against Ibsen. A brilliant young critic for the *Evening Post*, Delancey Halbert, consistently provided a fiery defense of both Ibsen and the other Europeans. He was joined by James O'Donnell Bennett, who took over for Glover when he retired. The *Tribune* straddled the fence. Eventually, Halbert and Bennett carried the day.

<sup>15</sup> Three Chicago critics—Halbert, Bennett, and *Tribune* critic H.L. Hubbard—deplored both the style of theater offered by the Syndicate as well as its aggressive business practices, but other critics and most audiences supported it. Still, the controversy provided another example of a healthy critical debate.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Fosdick, "Ashton Stevens," in John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Bill Doll, "Ashton Stevens," *Theatre Arts*, July 1951, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Gene Fowler, *Good Night Sweet Prince: The Life and Times of John Barrymore* (Philadelphia: Blakiston, 1944), 24.

<sup>20</sup> See Jan Charles Czechowski, "Art and Commerce: Chicago Theatre 1900-1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982).

<sup>21</sup> William Leonard, ed., *Chicago Stagebill Yearbook* (Chicago: Stagebill, 1947), 15.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Putnam, "'Gas' Agent Explodes," letter to the editor of the *Chicago Post*, circa 1926. Undated clipping found in the Goodman Publicity Scrapbook, Special Collections Department, Chicago Public Library.

<sup>23</sup> Ashton Stevens, "Behind the Scenes," *Chicago Herald Examiner*, May 5, 1926.

<sup>24</sup> Goodman Publicity Scrapbook, Special Collections Department, Chicago Public Library.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Charles Collins, "Picking Parts for Future Use of Miss Cornell," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1930.

<sup>29</sup> "Charles Collins" (obituary), *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1964.

<sup>30</sup> Richard B. Gehman, "Claudia Cassidy—Medusa of the Midwest," *Theatre Arts* July 1951, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Ward Morehouse, "America's Dramatic Critics," *Theatre Arts*, November 1956, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Many believe Eugene O'Neill is America's greatest playwright. This writer respectfully disagrees.

<sup>33</sup> Gehman, "Claudia Cassidy—Medusa of the Midwest," 14.

<sup>34</sup> Lehman Engel, *The Critics* (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 230.

<sup>35</sup> Claudia Cassidy, "On the Aisle," *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 3, 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Tice L. Miller, "Claudia Cassidy," in Wilmet and Miller, eds., *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> A good introduction to New York's dominance of the critical pantheon can be found in Tice L. Miller, "Criticism," in *Ibid.*, 131-33.

<sup>38</sup> Fosdick, "Newspaper Critic Shapes Chicago Style of Theater," 114-28.



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