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# Newspaper Critic Shapes Chicago Style of Theater

by Scott Fosdick

*This study of coverage of the local theater scene from 1975-85 in three Chicago dailies found that one critic, Richard Christiansen, had the strongest influence on the development of the Chicago Style that flourished in the off-Loop theaters.*

Arts reviewers who work for daily newspapers usually gain attention only when they have written something that has hurt somebody. Despite the hundreds of plays and numerous playwrights he championed when he was theater critic for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich will be forever known as the Butcher of Broadway. Everyone knows what happened when a critic dared to write a less than rosy notice of a recital by President Harry Truman's daughter. Ask any arts editor: The phone rings more often when the reviews are negative. "You're killing the arts in this town," producers howl.

And yet, when artists and arts organizations thrive, few credit the support of perceptive and influential critics. When things go wrong, critics are handy whipping boys (and girls). When things go right, it is, of course, the unstoppable brilliance of the artists that deserves the credit. This mode of thought works best with individual flops and hits. It is easy to blame a critic for an uncharitable review, and it would, of course, be absurd to credit the critic when an undeniable masterpiece comes along. Only when one takes a longer view is it possible to see the real benefits to a community of reviewers' work.

This study probes the influence of daily newspaper reviewers on a theater scene in which things went phenomenally right: Theater companies sprouted and flourished, artists emerged and found national success and a style of theater coalesced. Of course, the producers of that art deserve the greatest credit for

their accomplishments. But if critics have it in their power to censure and prune, they must also be able to nurture.

## **Background**

The current theatrical life of Chicago, like that of many cities in America, is a continuation of the regional theater movement that transformed the American stage in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from a system of shows traveling to and from Broadway to an environment of professional local production in some ways similar to that found in major cities 100 years ago. It is a movement with many important signposts but no official beginning. In Chicago, the pivotal event might have been the repeal of restrictive fire codes that had been in place since the tragic Iroquois Theater fire of 1903 that had killed 600. The repeal of those codes led to the founding in 1974 of three influential theaters, to be joined soon thereafter by many others. In one decade, the League of Chicago Theatres grew from 20 members to more than 150.<sup>1</sup>

By the mid-1980s, Chicago theater had not only grown in numbers but in national reputation. Commentators in Chicago, New York and elsewhere wrote of a style of theater that distinguished the work of Chicago artists. The *Chicago Style*, as it was sometimes called, was never given a completely consistent definition; most who used the term, however, referred to a physically demonstrative form of acting that found its fullest expression in highly naturalistic plays performed in intimate venues. In retrospect, the decade from 1975 to 1985 appears to have been a pivotal one. It is the decade in which Chicago truly became a regional center. For media scholars, the crucial question is the degree of influence the press exerted on the growth and style of Chicago theater in this important period. That influence naturally increased as the number of local productions rose and the number of touring productions fell.<sup>2</sup>

## **Research Questions**

This decade was chosen for study because of the growth in quantity and reputation of local theatrical products in Chicago. It seemed impossibly problematic to determine with precision how much the critics had fed this growth quantitatively. This study has the more limited ambition of revealing ways in which the critical community encouraged or discouraged the manner in which it grew. Did it take the critics some time to warm to new styles offered by theater artists? Did the critics disagree with each other? And if they did, were there winners and losers? Most importantly, is there evidence the critics were influential as a group or as individuals? Did the preferences they revealed in 1975 line up in any meaningful way with what Chicago theater became in the subsequent decade of growth?

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## Literature Review

Research on critics and their influence is far from plentiful, but there is some worth noting, particularly if we broaden our search beyond critics of the theater. Much of the early research involves biographies of particular critics, predominantly from New York. Most of this is historical in nature. Miller wrote the leading book on American drama critics of the Victorian era,<sup>3</sup> and Fosdick found a lively corps of critics writing for Chicago newspapers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Also, Czechowski and Dryden wrote dissertations on Chicago theater of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in which they relied heavily on the work of the Chicago critics without focusing on their work.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, several researchers have looked at the effects of reviews on readers. Wyatt and Badger began a stream of research with an experimental study that identified high information content as having a greater effect on reader interest than opinion.<sup>6</sup> In the late 1990s, marketing researchers tried to determine if critics influence arts buying or merely predict it. Eliashberg and Shugan found evidence of prediction without influence in film reviews.<sup>7</sup> Looking at New York drama critics, Reddy, Swaminathan and Motley found strong evidence of critical influence, particularly on the part of the dominant newspaper, *The New York Times*.<sup>8</sup>

Other than the historically based studies, very few looked beyond individual critics or the impact of individual components of reviews to consider larger issues of arts coverage. In England, Scott looked at the question of gatekeeping on the part of arts editors and writers.<sup>9</sup> Gatekeeping may prove to be one of the most appropriate theoretical underpinnings for research in this area. If, as the current study suggests, the influence of criticism had become concentrated in a small subset of an already dwindling number of practitioners, that amounts to significant gatekeeping power wielded by a very few.

The most promising development in the field was the first report of the National Arts Journalism Program, titled, *Reporting the Arts*. What this study lacks in standard scholarship with the absence of a bibliography and no footnotes, it makes up for in its comprehensive and multi-faceted snapshot of 15 dailies in 10 cities across the country.<sup>10</sup>

## Hypothesis and Method

In light of the above, this study begins to fill a gap between the historical and the contemporary and between the narrow concerns of marketing and the broad overview of the *Reporting the Arts* book. The current study uses a multi-method approach to investigate critical influence on the development of theater in Chicago at a pivotal point in its recent history. The 1975-76 season was chosen because it followed the fire-code repeal that led to an influx of new, little theaters, while standing at the beginning of a decade of growth in both theater

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production and reputation. It is logical to presume that the best moments to find evidence of critical influence would be at the beginning of a period of growth or decline. Methods used include a broad survey of the critics' written work, interviews with those critics, a close analysis of one season of arts writing, including a tallying of numbers, lengths and types of articles, and a review of local and national commentary.

This researcher began with one working hypothesis: A number of influential critics championed theater that appealed to their individual tastes; where those tastes overlapped, the Chicago Style emerged.

This hypothesis was based on the assumption that success depended on appealing to a broad audience and, therefore, a majority of the critics. No one critic appeared to have dominant stature. Unlike previous periods in Chicago's history when a single critic attained national fame — Amy Leslie at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ashton Stevens in the 1920s and 1930s, Claudia Cassidy in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s — the decade in question featured retirements and transfers of critics, none of whom wrote nationally or seemed eager to stand out from the pack. If the preferences of each critic were determined, one might be able to assemble what would amount to a Venn diagram that could then be compared to the elements of the Chicago Style as defined in the national media.

The research followed three steps:

1. The pre-boom critical landscape was investigated by the scanning of every page of Chicago's three newspapers from September 1975 through May 1976 in which each theater-related piece was read and noted. This was a year when theatrical activity was beginning to pick up in Chicago, but no one had as yet started writing about the Chicago Style. For the first three months of the season when production was steady, a tally was kept of the number of stories in each newspaper, the types, whether reviews, news, features or commentaries and column inches. For the entire year, each review and commentary was read for indications of the aesthetic preferences of the critics as well as for elements of writing style that might influence readers. Finally, critics from that period were interviewed about their critical approaches.<sup>11</sup>

2. The next step was to assess the state of theater after the boom had arrived, in 1985. A number of references to Chicago theater and the Chicago Style were found in national magazines and in newspapers in cities on the East Coast where Chicago theater artists traveled to perform. Industry statistics were consulted, and changes in the ranks of the critics since the 1975-76 season were noted.

3. The final step involved looking for signs of linkage between the attitudes and practices identified in step one and the nature of the theater community at its height 10 years later. In other words, would there be any correlation between the work of the critics and subsequent theatrical life, and, second, were conditions present that might have encouraged one thing to lead to the other? This is an admittedly imprecise method, unlikely to yield ironclad claims of singular causes leading to singular effects. But it struck this researcher as the best

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available strategy for beginning to look at the big picture of how critics influence the development of artistic life in a city.

## Findings

The evidence did not support the initial hypothesis, but it provided strong support for another conclusion. There was little significant overlap in the aesthetic preferences of the reviewers; a Venn diagram would yield largely discrete circles. Hence, no match emerged between the areas of agreement among the critics and the defining characteristics of the subsequent Chicago Style. Surprisingly, perhaps, a perfect correlation was found between the long-held aesthetic preferences of Richard Christiansen and the Chicago Style. In addition, the working circumstances of all the critics put Christiansen in a position to be influential. Again, this is not an ironclad causal link; however, those who examine the evidence closely share the conclusion that Christiansen had a profound influence on an important period in the development of theater in Chicago. In short, the kind of theater Christiansen liked flourished and flourished so completely that it became known as the Chicago Style. The kinds of theater Christiansen did not like dwindled. He had the motive, the means and the opportunity. If this were a crime, any jury would find the evidence compelling. Sometimes, circumstantial evidence is strong enough to convict.

From 10 daily newspapers at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, three remained in Chicago in 1975. They were *The Tribune* (circulation 660,826 daily), *The Sun-Times* (550,893) and *The Daily News* (402,004). From September through November, the period of greatest theatrical activity in most American cities of 1975, the *Daily News* ran 61 theater stories, and 27 of them were reviews, and 34 were news, commentary or feature stories. The *Tribune* ran 48 theater stories, and 26 were reviews, and 22 were news, commentaries or features. The *Sun-Times* trailed with 44 theater stories, of which 18 were reviews, 26 were news, commentaries or features. Calendar listings, photos and capsule reviews are not included in these figures. Here, too, the *Daily News* led. All three newspapers published comparable calendar listings, but only the *Daily News* also featured a weekly capsule round-up. Stand-alone photos — that is, photos with captions but no accompanying stories — were infrequent space fillers for all three newspapers.

In terms of space devoted to reviews only, the 27 *Daily News* reviews ran 294 inches, an average of 10.9 inches per review. The *Tribune* compiled 257 inches of reviews, a 9.9 inch average, and the *Sun-Times* compiled 194 inches at an average of 10.8 inches each. The number of stories counted are a more reliable index of coverage than are column inches because typefaces, leading and column widths vary.

Lacking a Sunday edition, the *Daily News* published what it called a "Weekend" edition on Saturday, which included a tabloid arts section titled

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Panorama. Although the *Daily News* led in terms of the number of theater stories, the visibility of those stories was less favorable. During the week, theater pieces almost always ran at the top of the inside pages that carried the movie advertisements — advertisements that were dominated by lurid drawings for X-rated movies in 1975-76. Neither reefers or indexes alerted readers about where to find theater stories. The *Tribune* nearly always included theater in its page two index, and the *Sun-Times* occasionally did. The *Daily News* never was more specific on its page one index than amusements, which seemed to refer to the movie advertisements more than the arts coverage because it invariably listed the movie ad page whether or not it also included arts stories.

The *Daily News* ran more stories about theater. Its lead over the *Tribune* is mostly due to a greater number of news stories. It broke the two major theater stories of the season.<sup>12</sup> It also offered regular collections of Drama Notes, which ran together in groups of four to eight items. In the figures above, such a collection of Drama Notes counted as one story. The wide-ranging nature of these Drama Notes typified the democratic slant of *Daily News* coverage. This was augmented by the weekly Panorama capsule-review roundup. The big commercial theaters were likely to receive little more coverage in the *Daily News* than the next tier of smaller theaters. Fluctuations in space from week to week meant that the very smallest theaters could drop off the list.

Sydney J. Harris and Christiansen worked for the *Daily News*. Glenna Syse and a host of backup and freelance writers worked for the *Sun-Times*. Writers for the *Tribune* were Roger Dettmer, followed by Linda Winer when Dettmer retired in November of 1975.

Harris wrote a regular non-theater column for the editorial page, so he tended to review only the biggest commercial openings, leaving coverage of the new resident theaters to Christiansen, who said in his interview with this researcher that this arrangement encouraged him to look for reasons to write about these new theaters so that he wouldn't be open to general assignments. More than any of the Chicago critics, Christiansen had reason early in his career to pull for the regional theater movement to succeed.

At the *Sun-Times*, Syse also was generally supportive of the new small theaters. Her series of columns attacking the restrictive fire codes might have had an influence on the decision in city hall to rewrite them and open the floodgates for new theater. She was also frequently ill and on sabbatical. Most of her writing was of reviews and commentaries, and the feature stories were most often written by other staff and freelancers.

At the *Tribune*, first Dettmer and then Winer wrote virtually all of the reviews. Only one other four-inch review ran in the fall period. Perhaps because the *Tribune* could afford it, Dettmer and Winer were more likely to travel to New York and elsewhere to review theater outside Chicago. The *Tribune* was also more likely to run wire service stories on theatrical events elsewhere. The result was less non-review coverage of the new resident theaters than the other papers.

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What of the aesthetic preferences of the critics? Harris and Dettmer were perhaps the most literate of the group. Had Harris covered the theater more regularly in this period of growth, and had Dettmer not retired just as it was getting going, both might have had considerable influence on its development. Given these circumstances, the decision was made to concentrate on the three most active daily critics of the period--Winer, Syse and Christiansen.

Winer joined the *Tribune* as a trainee in 1969 and worked her way through positions as assistant music critic, assistant theater critic, dance critic and critic-at-large before being named theater and dance critic in November of 1975 following the firing of Dettmer. In her first season under the new title, Winer's reviews of the new theaters tended to run late and short. When she was not reviewing, she wrote features on dance and events in Washington and New York, but nothing of any length on the new off-Loop theater companies.

Our comments here pertain to Winer's work at the very beginning of her career as a theater critic. She is still reviewing in New York. Although her reviews were full of judgments about small points—costumes, stage business, etc.—she appeared to be reluctant or unable to declare a thesis or venture opinions about the overall meaning of a piece, especially if the piece were non-naturalistic. She enlivened her reviews with quips, barbs and wordplay that tended to mask the absence of strong opinion. Much of her writing in this year suggested that she felt Chicago theater was not being born but dying. The overall effect was of a critic who was profoundly bored. A typical review in her first year ended with the words, "I honestly don't feel much about this one either way."<sup>13</sup>

In interviews with this researcher, Syse and Christiansen both cited as their major journalistic influence the same man--Herman Kogan. He was Syse's editor when she joined the *Sun-Times* in 1955 and became Christiansen's first editor when he joined the *Daily News* in 1958. Both Syse and Christiansen

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credited Kogan with instilling in them the virtues of good reporting. As Syse put it, Kogan's credo was, "accuracy, clarity, brevity."

Despite this common beginning, the two developed entirely distinct voices. If they are correct in describing Kogan's approach to arts coverage as being a largely reportorial one, the difference in their approaches may have come from what each saw as the proper object of the reporting process. For Christiansen, it was the objective facts of the production. His reviews revealed a marked division between the verifiable details of plot, theme and setting and his subjective opinion of whether or not these elements added up to a satisfying experience. There was no such distinction between report and opinion in Syse's reviews. From the first word, she reported on her opinion.

Syse did not write arguments, nor did she amass evidence. She filed clear and brief reports on her various opinions of a show. As a result, one's reaction to her work tends to be personal. To take issue with a Syse review is to take issue with her. More than any of the other Chicago critics of her time, Syse was a poet. Her reviews have a natural rhythm that draws the reader along from phrase to phrase. Moreover, unlike Winer, Syse was comfortable with plays she said she did not understand. She would play with alternate meanings, appreciating the difficult and the unusual, all the while projecting the persona of a friendly, idiosyncratic pair of eyes and ears.

For all that, Syse's impact was marked by absences. For health reasons, her attendance at plays was the spottiest. And her reviews may have been accurate reports of her frame of mind, but they often left out vital information. This is the kind of detail that researchers might easily miss, unless they are checking their analysis of one review with others. Ironically, although Syse was the most open to experimental or avant-garde work, she employed the vocabulary of an earlier age. For example, in a rave, she might call a play a "wow." So she was not likely to appeal to the young generation whose ticket-buying fueled the birth of the off-Loop theaters. She could not be counted on to write a full review of the sort that would both draw theater patrons and help prepare them to appreciate and understand challenging work. In fact, she rarely analyzed or explained, preferring to react in her whimsical voice.<sup>14</sup>

This brings us to Christiansen. A graduate of Carleton College, Christiansen had been a general assignment reporter for the *Daily News* for six years when arts editor Kogan launched *Panorama*. Shortly thereafter, Robert Sickinger revived the Hull House drama program, and Christiansen jumped at the chance to review it before anyone else in the city bothered. That set a pattern. Christiansen became the early and indefatigable champion of the city's small theaters. A decade later, Christiansen returned from vacation to discover a new play by a new writer had already opened to negative reviews--*Sexual Perversity in Chicago* by David Mamet. Christiansen wrote a strongly positive review of this work, which was Mamet's first play to find success in New York and on screen.

In an interview with this researcher, Christiansen said his aim throughout his career has been "to try to find and promote good work." Good work, in his

view, is a production with "an emotional investment...I'm someone who likes to be grabbed." He said that he is not patient with the "deliberately and spitefully obscure or pretentious." This raises a key question: How does he know when a work is deliberately and spitefully obscure or when it is a well-intentioned effort that simply fails to communicate effectively to him or, to shift the onus, that he fails to understand?

As mentioned earlier, throughout his career Christiansen has been primarily a reporter, even when he is writing a review. His strengths appear to be observing and reporting rather than digesting and interpreting. A wealth of anecdotal evidence suggests that, however one might disapprove of Christiansen's work, no one ever accuses him of getting his facts wrong. His reviews are clear, even-handed reports in which opinion takes a back seat. When his opinions are strong, he often feels compelled to show the other side.

His reviews in the 1975-76 season were often dominated by straightforward production history, plot and character description. More often than not, he would eventually deliver a verdict, but the longer he waited, the more likely the review would be negative. He meted out negative judgments grudgingly. When he wanted to go easy on a struggling company, he would simply withhold comment and fill the space with an informative report. The main disadvantage to such an approach is that the prose can be less than scintillating. A thoroughly scathing review by a less beneficent critic has the advantage of implying that the theater is worth getting upset over. Passion, whether positive or negative, is usually more compelling than simple reportage.<sup>15</sup>

Christiansen did write some thoroughly negative reviews in that season. Certain circumstances spurred him to take off the gloves. There were commercial productions, productions by established companies and, as mentioned above, productions that he judged to be spitefully obscure or pretentious, which tended to include most of the avant-garde.<sup>16</sup> There are countless examples of unrestrainedly negative Christiansen reviews of the first two categories. These appear to be rooted in his desire to give the underdog a break.<sup>17</sup>

## **Chicago Theater in 1985**

Having outlined the critical forces present before Chicago's second theatrical boom period, the next step is to look at the nature of Chicago theater after the boom had firmly established itself.

In the decade in question, Chicago theater appears to have grown in size and narrowed in scope. The growth in numbers of Chicago theaters in this period was phenomenal. But because there were so many, the vast majority of them were small.<sup>18</sup> In financial terms, then, Chicago was a city where it was easy to begin a theater, in part because of relatively affordable storefronts, but difficult to build that theater to a point where it could pay mature actors and administrators decent wages. Although a few theaters made successful moves to larger spaces

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in the 1990s, most notably Steppenwolf, in 1985, most companies that tried to do that failed.

Despite the inability of the off-Loop theaters to find stability in the years in which their numbers swelled, from 1975 to 1985, the artistic reputation of Chicago theater thrived. In terms of how it was perceived by commentators outside of the Midwest, Chicago theater was best known, not surprisingly, for the work of Steppenwolf, Wisdom Bridge and Goodman artistic director Gregory Mosher, together with associate director and playwright David Mamet. A spate of productions that found their ways to the East Coast led to awards and acclaim in national publications. In a widely published quote, director/producer Peter Sellars called Chicago "the hottest theater town in America." Mamet was well on his way to success. The work of Mosher came under scrutiny in New York in 1985 because that was the year he left the Goodman to become director of the Vivian Beaumont theater at Lincoln Center.

When the national press wrote about a Chicago Style of theater, it usually meant acting typified by what *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll termed "a raw but humane passion." This is a phrase worth analyzing. Kroll repeated it in the same article, and others found similar terms. The noun is "passion" — that is, Chicago artists concentrated not on ideas or intellectual matters, but on the emotional life of the characters. The first modifier of that passion is "raw," suggesting that the emotions are displayed in their natural state, uncooked by acting that is overly refined, delicate or nuanced. The second modifier, "humane," suggests the major goal of naturalism, which is to engender sympathy for the character portrayed.<sup>19</sup> In framing their stories with such words, national commentators ignored those few and dwindling theaters that did not fit, such as the classically oriented Court Theater. Similar phrases such as youthful energy, no-holds-barred acting, viscerally committed acting style, raucous, funky and seething appear again and again.<sup>20</sup>

The last major national publication to profile Chicago theater that season was *Time* magazine, whose William A. Henry III offered *Second City, but First Love* on February 17, 1986. His piece touched all the bases.

*While much of the rest of the American theater seems overrefined, elite and abstract, the Chicago troupes have built an enthusiastic mainstream audience for what many of the artists characterize as "rock-'n'-roll theater," rough-edged, noisy, pulsating with energy and appealing less to the mind than to the heart and groin.<sup>21</sup>*

Locally, Chicago critics and commentators welcomed the fame of the companies who succeeded with physical, naturalistic acting while sometimes pointing to a general lack of classical theater, avant-garde theater and successful local playwrights, Mamet and a few others notwithstanding. Some also noted that the great number of theaters appeared to be competing for a theater audience that was not keeping pace. Critics offered suggestions for how to

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increase that audience; none suggested that 150 theaters were more than even the most eager market could bear, that Chicago theater artists and audiences might be better served by 25 healthy groups than 125 starving ones.<sup>22</sup>

One major change affected the critical equation in the decade between 1975 and 1985. On March 4, 1978, the *Chicago Daily News* ceased publication. Christiansen moved to the *Tribune*, where, for two years, he wrote as critic-at-large and shared reviewing duties with Winer. When Winer left the *Tribune* in 1980 for a series of jobs at the *New York Daily News*, a *Tribune* Company paper, *USA Today* and *Long Island Newsday*, Christiansen became the main critic for theater and dance and within a few years was also named entertainment editor.<sup>23</sup>

Media commentators in this period noted that, as the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* each gained roughly 100,000 readers from the demise of the *Daily News*, they also solidified their demographics, with the *Sun-Times* taking on the working class persona of a Murdoch paper and the *Tribune* dominating upper-middle and upper class neighborhoods on the north side and in the north and northwest suburbs. The *Tribune's* demographic was coveted by advertisers and provided most of the ticket buyers for theater and most of the donors, a significant underpinning of nonprofit theater.<sup>24</sup>

For our purposes, the other significant change in the intervening decade involves Syse, whose trips to the theater became more infrequent. Criticism at the *Sun-Times* in 1985 was a committee affair. At any given opening, a theater might be reviewed by Syse, Hedy Weiss, Bill Saunders and Lloyd Sachs. At the *Tribune*, Christiansen still vigorously attended most openings. When two plays opened on the same night, the smaller theater might be reviewed by staffers Sid Smith, Larry Kart, Rick Kogan or the occasional freelancer.

## Conclusion

Although we began this study expecting to find influence emanating from the Chicago critics as a group, we are left with strong evidence pointing to the primacy of one critic, Christiansen.

Let us begin our defense of that conclusion by listing the main characteristics of Chicago theater as it existed in 1985.

- There were many theaters.
  - Most of them were relatively small. Compared to other cities its size, Chicago was short on big-budget, non-profit theaters.
  - Chicago theater's most salient quality was its acting, which was raw, humane and passionate — naturalistic in the extreme.
  - It was un-intellectual, if not anti-intellectual.
  - Chicago lacked an avant-garde.
  - Chicago was weak on the classics.
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The correlation between this list and the practices and aesthetic attitudes of Christiansen is profound. The first two items line up neatly with our assessment of Christiansen as a critic who took great pains to nurture small and struggling groups but was more demanding of larger, established theaters.<sup>25</sup> Christiansen may have had moral motives for this, a desire to help the underdog. His aesthetic also supported it. High budget theaters have larger auditoriums and larger stages. The ideal of naturalistic theater that hurls raw, sweating life into the laps of the audience is easier to achieve when those laps are five rather than 25 feet from the actors.

Items three through six on the list speak to what the Chicago Style did and did not offer. In commentaries Christiansen sometimes bemoaned the limitations of the Chicago Style, but in his reviews he almost invariably supported that style and censured intellectual and avant-garde plays.<sup>26</sup> Raw, humane, passionate naturalism was at the core of Christiansen's pattern of positive response. At risk of blurring distinctions in a diverse and multi-faceted field, it might be said that much postmodern avant-garde work highlights and comments on its own theatricality — an approach that is inherently anti-naturalistic, didactic and even, in a way, self-consciously pretentious, in that it accentuates the pretense of art. As such, the dominant avant-garde is at direct odds with Christiansen's underlying aesthetic. Even if he were disposed to like it, Christiansen's reportorial style would not serve intellectual, pre-modern classic and avant-garde work, which requires critics who are willing to explain, explicate and translate the unfamiliar.<sup>27</sup>

Christiansen's tendency to report rather than opine might have helped spur theatrical growth in Chicago. According to the experiment by Wyatt and Badger, a high degree of information alone was enough to significantly increase interest in a film, even when the review was evaluatively neutral. This implies increased impact for Christiansen's highly informational but often evaluatively neutral reviews.<sup>28</sup>

From 1975 to 1985, Christiansen and Chicago theater rose together. His aesthetic — established in the early 1960s and maintained — is a perfect match for the Chicago Style that dominated Chicago stages in 1985. Early in this ten-year boom period Christiansen moved from a secondary writer at a struggling newspaper to main critic at the dominant, upscale newspaper. His critical competition retired, left town or cut back on reviewing. Christiansen knew what he liked. He could be depended on to support it with clear, accurate reviews. He could be depended on to show up when theater workers could not always be sure whom the other papers would send. He had more readers, and they were the right readers from the strictly pecuniary perspective of the press agent.

From Mamet to the Steppenwolf actors, many of those artists he championed flourished. Largely for the better, Chicago theater became the theater of Christiansen. Were he not a self-effacing man with an unspectacular style of writing and no apparent ambition to make a name for himself in national publications, Christiansen would most likely be recognized as one of the most

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influential critics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How many of his colleagues could boast that they helped engender a theatrical style? Christiansen himself never has so boasted, but unless this study misses the mark, he's entitled.

What are the broader implications of this study? Chicago is not the only city in America to see its newspapers dwindle from many to one, two or three. When those few newspapers that remain divvy up the demographics such that one newspaper owns the moneyed classes, that has profound effects on the arts. Despite the lack of research in this area, it seems clear that most American cities have arts scenes that depend on one dominant newspaper to find their public. For the performing arts, which are by definition local, this means one critic is likely to wield tremendous influence over what flourishes and what does not.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with thriving local arts scenes mediated by a variety of voices in varied local media. It ended with arts communities buffeted between mass electronic arts operating on a national level and critical fiefdoms on a local level. At best, we have placed our culture in the hands of benefactors — perhaps even unwilling — despots. As Mrs. Willy Loman said in *Death of a Salesman*, "Attention must be paid." This researcher hopes this study leads to further research on the impact of critics in other cities and other arts. As for the practical application of this research, editors should be urged to look for ways to increase the number of critical voices available to readers, perhaps by sending more than one critic to review each production or by employing different critics for print and online versions of their publications.

#### Notes

1. Sharon Phillips, "A Theatrical Tapestry," in the exhibition catalog for *Resetting the Stage: Theater Beyond the Loop, 1960-1990* (Chicago: The Chicago Public Library Special Collections Department, 1990), 9.

2. The decline of Broadway and the road (that is, traveling Broadway productions) combined with the rise of regional theater to increase the impact of the work of local (non-New York) critics. Moreover, the precipitous decline in the number of newspapers in most cities could be assumed to increase the influence of the critics that remained.

3. Tice L. Miller, *Bohemians and Critics: American Theatre Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981).

4. Scott Fosdick, "Chicago Newspaper Theater Critics of the Early 20th Century: Mediating Ibsen, the Syndicate and the Little Theaters" (paper presented at the annual meeting of The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Phoenix, Ariz., August 2000).

5. Wilma Jane Dryden, *Chicago Theatre as Reflected in the Newspapers, 1900 through 1904* (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1960); Jan Charles Czechowski, *Art and Commerce: Chicago Theatre 1900-1920* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1982).

6. Robert O. Wyatt and David P. Badger, "Effects of Information and Evaluation in Film Criticism." *Journalism Quarterly* 67 (Summer 1990): 359-368.

7. Jehoshua Eliashberg and Steven M. Shugan, "Film Critics: Influencers or Predictors?" *Journal of Marketing* 61 (April 1997): 68-78.

8. Srinivas K. Reddy, Vanitha Swaminathan, and Carol M. Motley, "Exploring the Determinants of Broadway Show Success," *Journal of Marketing Research* XXXV (August 1998): 370-383.

9. Robert Dawson Scott, "Bridging the Cultural Gap: How Arts Journalists Decide What Gets onto the Arts and Entertainment Pages," *Critical Quarterly* 41 (Spring 1999): 46-55.

10. Michael Janeway et al., *Reporting the Arts: News Coverage of Arts and Culture in America* (New York: National Arts Journalism Program, Columbia University, 1999).

11. Linda Winer declined.

12. The two news stories broken by the *Daily News* involved the Art Institute's proposed three-year phase-out of the Goodman School of Drama (later taken on by DePaul University) and a boycott of the annual Joseph Jefferson Awards ceremony over the issue of awards often going to visiting celebrity actors rather than local veterans.

13. Linda Winer, "Cruel Humour at a 'Sunday Dinner,'" *Chicago Tribune*, 1 May 1976, sec. 1, p. 16.

14. It is interesting to note that while Syse had the vocabulary and perhaps the image of a middle-aged frump and the *Tribune's* Linda Winer cultivated the image of a hip member of the younger generation (as it was called), Winer's review of *Hot L Baltimore* (at the Forum dinner theater) twice mentioned the show's nudity, while Syse's review did not mention it once.

15. Examples abound of Christiansen's tendency to postpone negative comments until late in the review. Three such reviews are: Richard Christiansen, "2d Season for a New Concept," *Chicago Daily News*, 8 January 1976, p. 27; Richard Christiansen, "Charm Fails Odd Couple in 'Au Pair,'" *Chicago Daily News*, 27 October 1975, p. 14; and Richard Christiansen, "Playwrights' Center Does Careful 'Still Lives,'" *Chicago Daily News*, 4 April 1976, p. 22.

16. His disdain for the obscure and pretentious issues from an aesthetic viewpoint, one finds in all his work, beginning with his first reviews in the sixties. Two trains left the station of the avant-garde theater early on; Christiansen hopped (and hyped) one of them. Both were represented by the Hull House plays on which young Christiansen cut his teeth. The first was Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. The second was Jack Gelber's *The Connection*. Beckett's play was European, intellectual, an assertion of the absurdity and unreality of life; Gelber's was a naturalistic, physical look at the lives of addicts, a play to be felt in the gut more than the head. Christiansen took the train called naturalism and never got off. And he got on board very early in his career, long before anyone could have guessed where Chicago theater was likely to end up.

17. Christiansen's reviews that lambasted touring productions included: Richard Christiansen, "It's Sunless 'Raisin,'" *Chicago Daily News*, 26 March 1976, p. 33; Richard Christiansen, "'Best of Everybody' an Uncle Miltie Mess," *Chicago Daily News*, 23 September 1975, p. 21; and Richard Christiansen, "Lana and Louis give it a whirl," *Chicago Daily News*, 25 November 1975, p. 27.

18. Chicago was a national leader in terms of the number of theaters in operation, but not in terms of operating budgets. In 1985, Chicago had only two \$1 million-plus budget non-profit theaters. New York City had seven. Los Angeles had four, Washington D.C. had three (plus the Kennedy Center, a non-profit center that often offered for-profit shows), and Seattle, with a population one-sixth the size of Chicago's, had three. There were seven other cities with two theaters in the million dollar-plus group, but all had much smaller populations than Chicago: San Francisco, Dallas, New Haven, Cleveland, Boston, San Diego and Philadelphia. See: Theatre Communications Group, *Theatre Profiles 7* (New York: Theatre Communications Group 1985).

19. Jack Kroll, "All the City's a Stage," *Newsweek* 106 (8 July 1985): 72-73.

20. Hillary DeVries, "Those Hip Chicago Theaters," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 November 1985, p. 29; Ross Wetzstoon, "The Chicago Charge," *New York*, 16 December 1985, p. 48; William A. Henry III, "Second City, but First Love," *Time*, 17 February 1986, p. 94-95.

21. William A. Henry III, "Second City, but First Love."

22. Glenna Syse, "Chicago Theater Shines in National Spotlight," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 29 December 1985, sec. Show, p. 2-3; Richard Christiansen, "The Nation Loves Chicago Theater, but What's in It for Us Back Home?" *Chicago Tribune*, 14 July 1985, sec. 13, p. 10.

23. In a parting column looking back on her *Tribune* career, Winer revealed disdain for the Chicago Style (the drudgery of watching "someone sweat on stage five times a week"). The "magical

nights" she listed were all ballet. Linda Winer, "A Departing Critic Looks back on 11 Rewarding Years," *Chicago Tribune*, 24 August 1980, sec. 6, p. 2.

24. Ronica Roth, "What's Black and White, Read all over?" *The Monitor* (Summer 1990): 6. (*The Monitor* is a journal published by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism).

25. In a similar, albeit anecdotal vein, this researcher once heard Gregory Mosher complain that he had received tremendous support from Christiansen so long as Mosher was running Stage 2 (the Goodman's small stage series), but that the critical standard became impossibly high the moment he became Artistic Director of the Goodman.

26. The exception was his support of those avant-garde plays that, like *The Connection*, relied on a kind of super naturalism – in other words, the Chicago Style in its most extreme form.

27. In 1990, the third installment of the bi-annual Chicago International Theater Festival (now defunct) presented an opportunity for Christiansen to display his hostility toward the European branch of the avant-garde. West Germany's Theater an der Ruhr brought its most successful, acclaimed production, *The Three Penny Opera*, a version Christiansen deemed "not worth a plugged nickel...amateur night...cheap, slothful and ignorant..." See Richard Christiansen "This 'Threepenny Opera' is a senseless production," *Chicago Tribune*, 5 June 1990, sec. 1, p. 16. In his disgust for the production, Christiansen failed to provide his usual reporting. He did not tell us that director Robert Ciulli had moved the scene from Victorian London to a vaudeville theater in Weimar Germany (the 1920s). He did not mention that the amateurishness of the players was intentional, since they were supposed to be performers in a movie theater singing songs between screenings. The intent of the production was to highlight the rivalries among third-rate performers, thereby commenting on the vicious competition that is Brecht's major theme. This was self-conscious, didactic meta-theater that Christiansen portrayed as simply inept.

28. Wyatt and Badger. "Effects of Information and Evaluation."