

OUTSIDER

JOHN ROCKWELL ON THE ARTS, 1967–2006



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INTRODUCTION

It's slightly creepy spending months on a selection of one's journalistic criticism over nearly forty years. My friend Dave Marsh's contribution to a desert-island-discs compilation called *Stranded* was "Onan's Greatest Hits." He meant sexy rock records for a lonely guy. Had I used that title, it would have been a testament to unhealthy self-absorption.

Outsider might seem an odd choice for someone who seems from the outside like the consummate insider. But it means something to me, both on a personal level—always feeling slightly detached from my surroundings—and professionally.

For a long while, in my twenties, I was unable to figure out a profession where I could feel at home. When I found one, journalism, and more particularly criticism, I entered a series of jobs in which I initially felt out of place, an outsider blundering in. Into classical music, where musicians seem like a closed guild, and where my fascination with "downtown" experimentation, let alone pop music, put me at odds with most of my fellow critics. Into pop, in which I started at the top with no prior experience. In Paris, where I was an American abroad. At Lincoln Center, where I ran a multimillion-dollar summer festival with no prior administrative experience. Back at *The New York Times*, I had never been an editor (except in high school) before I took over the Sunday Arts and Leisure section. And even though I had been a dance critic in California, few remembered that when I was named chief dance critic of the *Times*.

But there is more to *Outsider* than my own self-reflections. Criticism can be practiced from the inside or the outside. Eduard Hanslick, Wagner's arch-foe, played chamber music with Brahms. Joseph Horowitz

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argues with his characteristic ferocity that outsider critics have cut themselves off from the real life of art, and he adduces his own (and mine, curiously) experience as an arts administrator as a corrective.

My two bosses as a young critic, Martin Bernheimer and Harold C. Schonberg, both preached the independence of the critic from social entanglements. I sympathized with the ideal of the critic as being as informed about the arts and the circumstances of their making as possible, but still detached, still his own person, still able to comment from a vantage point separate from the inevitably self-serving perspective of artists themselves. When I was covering both classical and pop music in the '70s, I took a perverse pleasure in wearing jeans to Carnegie Hall (common today; times change) or dashing down for a late show at CBGB in a suit and tie.

This selection from my nearly four decades of arts journalism—including my eight-year hiatus as festival director and editor, and even then I kept on writing—consists almost entirely of criticism. I was a good reporter and feature writer. I enjoyed tracking down stories and evoking a scene or a person, and there are a few examples of that kind of writing here. The lines can blur between the subjectivity of criticism and the supposed objectivity of reporting. But for me, the excitement of arts journalism comes in voicing my own opinion, trying to shape the aesthetic experience into something communicable to others. When I wasn't a critic, when I couldn't set down my reaction to a performance in writing, the experience seemed oddly incomplete.

This, then, is a collection of critical writing. It is presented as it first appeared, although overt errors and glaring stylistic infelicities have been tweaked, and there are a few cuts of material of no interest beyond the moment. My criterion was mostly the quality of the writing, although the significance of the event or artist sometimes played a role. There is nothing from the three books that have appeared under my name, but everything else was fair game, including collections of essays to which I contributed.

In selecting what to include, I first divided my writing into categories: classical music, pop music, dance, and other, meaning theater, film, books, art, and all manner of indefinable cross-genre performance. This was helpful as an organizing methodology in providing a standard of comparison: which pop pieces stood up better than others, and so on. But for the reader, and ultimately for myself, I have arranged all this into chapters, chronologically ordered, with all the various arts I have written

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about mixed together. This makes for a truer picture of my critical evolution, and a better snapshot, year by year, of my varied interests. There are more pieces from the later years than the earlier years. This reflects some polishing of my prose, perhaps, but also the wider scope I had, the greater opportunities for extended commentary in the *Times* and elsewhere.

My headlines for each article in this book are blandly descriptive, no more: I have made no effort to grab the reader's attention. Most people don't realize that at newspapers the authors do not write the headlines. Over the years, some of mine were clever, some perfectly fine, some egregious. These just tell you what the article's about.

This may be a book of journalistic criticism, but of course the entire value of criticism can be questioned. When I had books of my own reviewed, I was angered or hurt by negative responses, but also annoyed by what I called trivial praise—opaque responses that never engaged with what I had done, even if the writers professed to like it. It gave me some insight into what performing artists must feel. (Of course, praise is preferable to disparagement, and I have certainly been guilty of lazy triviality in my own dispensing of judgments.) When I was at Lincoln Center, I was bemused by the odd combination of scorn and fear critics aroused in arts administrators. Forget high-toned analysis or poetic evocation; critics' only value, it seemed, was their ability to sell tickets. And then there are essayists and academicians who look down on newspaper critics as a lesser breed.

For me, newspaper criticism is a higher calling than all that. I have always believed, self-servingly, that even short notices written on deadline can be well written and insightful, and that journalism offers larger perspectives, beyond its place as the first stage of the historical record.

Covering a particular field, a beat—be it classical or pop or dance—forces one into a close-up knowledge of an artistic community. While I much admire the best specialist critics, I have always enjoyed breadth, openness, and diversity in my artistic appetites, even within a particular field: prizing rock and pre-rock standards and disco, for instance, or ballet and postmodern choreographic experimentation and social dancing. This book attests to my hunger for seeking parallels among the arts, insights from one to another.

There are dangers here. One can be accused of failing to plumb the depths. Or of a shallow impatience with routine, an unwillingness to brood and rebrood over recognized masterpieces, and of a fatal fascina-

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tion with novelty, eccentricity, and sensation. Those who still disparage the early-music movement think its partisans just want something different. Similarly, there are those who saw nothing in Sergiu Celidibache or Matthew Bourne or Talking Heads but perverse, self-serving egomania. I have responded to extremes because they enlarge the field of the possible.

That makes me a romantic, however much I shrink from self-categorization. I love balance and proportion and perhaps allow myself the luxury of artistic extremism because I ultimately feel that it will be contained within larger societal and aesthetic limits. But intensity of feeling, passion, and expression have always attracted me, whether from Richard Wagner, Lars von Trier, Patti Smith, Arturo Toscanini, Ornette Coleman, René Jacobs, Ariane Mnouchkine, Leonard Bernstein, Sylvie Guillem, the Who, Valery Gergiev, Martha Graham, Hélène Grimaud, Robert Wilson, or the Grand Union. These are hardly the only artists I have admired, or the only types of artists. But they suggest a sensibility.

I will leave to others the further analysis of me; enough with the onanism. But there are larger concerns in the arts and arts criticism. One is the ever more oppressive weight of popular culture in our society, and the other is the threatened demise of print journalism and hence of newspaper criticism as a viable profession.

When I became a rock critic in the early 1970s, there were many in the world of classical music who thought I was betraying the cause of high art. But there is a difference between then and now. Back then—quite apart from the fact that I really loved a lot of popular culture, and still do—I thought I was fighting the good fight against an entrenched high-art establishment, struggling to bring a little balance and veracity to our perceptions of what American culture really was. Now pop culture seems so dominant that classical artists and their champions have good reason to feel threatened.

In the '70s we could still dream our post-'60s dreams, however naive, that pop culture spoke to people in a way that high art could or would not, that the best pop culture had a vitality that could serve as a corrective to convention—a romantic jolt to ossification. We didn't write about popular culture because we thought it a good barometer of society (though there was some of that). We wrote because we thought it was thrilling, and true.

There is plenty of exciting popular culture today, maybe more than ever, and plenty of feisty independent filmmakers and dance companies

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and record labels helping artists make themselves seen and heard. But corporate control of the upper reaches of popular culture, always dangerous, has reached new levels of monopoly and oppression.

The solution, as I have tried to preach and practice all my life, is to blur the divisions. Music is music; dance is dance; the arts are the arts. Someone like Meredith Monk is not content to be a dancer or a composer or a singer or a filmmaker. Nor is Björk. Nor is Julie Taymor or Twyla Tharp or anyone unselfconsciously comfortable ignoring the high-low divide. They are artists, and most audiences are interested in the arts, not some narrow corner of one particular art as conventionally defined. You can argue—I have argued—that even at each extreme there is something of the other: even the snootiest elitist must communicate, and even the grubbiest commercial panderer needs some art to succeed.

As for newspapers and their decline in the face of the Internet and the supposedly callous indifference of youth, so what, say I. Newsprint is a delivery system, not a fetish object. With all due respect to the idealized freedom of the Web, as soon as someone figures out how to make real money from Web-based publications there will be jobs for critics to write about the arts. The whole wide world of blogs and Web sites has certainly opened up the dialogue, about the arts and everything else, in a salutary fashion. And there will always be readers, even youthful Web readers, who will devour and contest their opinions.

What you hold in your hand, however, is a printed book of reprints of print on paper. Maybe it represents a farewell, illuminated manuscripts on the eve of the printing press. Or maybe, looking optimistically forward instead of pessimistically backward, as I have been inclined to do all my long life, it's a hello.

New York
January 2006

1967-1972

I got my start in journalism in radio, at WHRB at Harvard and KPFA in Berkeley, doing mostly opera programs and, at Berkeley, a late-night live hippie-ish free-for-all. All this time I was working on my doctoral dissertation on opera reform in Berlin in the 1920s, and, for two years, dancing and co-writing manifestos for Ann (now Anna) Halprin. I began writing program notes for the San Francisco Opera, and in 1968 became the San Francisco correspondent for Opera News. In 1969 I spent six months as interim classical music and dance critic of The Oakland Tribune, after which, from 1970 to 1972, I was assistant classical music and dance critic of the Los Angeles Times.

DON RODRIGO

The San Francisco Examiner, December 9, 1967

Los Angeles—Modern opera, it is said, is dead. New works appear, often in fine, conscientious productions, and they are dutifully absorbed and gratefully forgotten. The range of their reception seems to be between outright failure and hopeful resignation.

So would you believe Alberto Ginastera's *Don Rodrigo*, his first opera, premiered in Buenos Aires in 1964, produced in New York in 1966, lauded by critics, and so popular that extra performances had to be added and the work repeated this year?

Would you believe that it opened the New York City Opera's Los Angeles season and was such a critical *and* popular success that the management decided to drop a performance of *Madama Butterfly* so it could be played again? And to a second full house and enthusiastic acclaim?

Well, it happened.

Whether Ginastera is the operatic messiah of the '60s will have to be answered by posterity. But he has indeed written a serious opera of integrity and broad appeal. A few Los Angelenos, primed for *Butterfly* despite all the cancellation announcements, were disoriented enough to leave, and talking was persistent during the opera's orchestral interludes. But on the whole the audience liked it, and so did I.

Don Rodrigo has a wonderful libretto, by the late Argentinean poet Alejandro Casona. It is a blend of almost archetypal operatic situations—coronation, seduction, battle, redemption—and of modern psy-

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chology, symbolism, and dramatic structure, clothed in rich and vibrant Spanish.

Ginastera's music is based upon the serial technique, and each of the nine scenes, as in *Wozzeck*, has its own specifically musical form. Yet, as in *Wozzeck*, the music is operatically conceived. The vocal writing shifts along the spectrum from speech through declaimed recitative to actual song. And over the whole Ginastera has set a smorgasbord of coloristic effects, using a huge (eight horns!) and varied orchestra.

Sometimes the effects seem too numerous and indiscriminate—if all the colors on the palette are mixed the result is a dirty, dull brown. Occasionally the sterility of post-Viennese international style serialism can be heard lurking beneath the glittering surface. But often enough the music works, and the third act especially is convincing throughout.

The New York City Opera's production, supervised by the composer, is an effective one. But like San Francisco's 1966 *Boris Godunov*, it tries to be a budget spectacle. *Rodrigo* calls for as much display as *Boris* or *Aida*, and the NYCO, for all its many virtues, is not the Bolshoi.

Stage director Tito Capobianco is an erratic, mercurial man of the theater. When his ideas work, as they often did in *Rodrigo*, they are exciting. But there were sloppy, poorly conceived moments as well, and the production could use some tightening and polishing—chorus people stand slackly, some of the dance sequences are lackadaisically executed.

Mexican tenor Plácido Domingo's Don Rodrigo was a triumph—a big, handsome voice, good stage presence, and intelligent musicianship and acting. Julius Rudel held the whole together soundly, and managed to compensate for the Music Center's lively pit acoustics.

Although the San Francisco Opera would gain nothing in prestige but a local premiere by staging *Rodrigo*, Kurt Herbert Adler should seriously consider it. Certainly the response in New York and Los Angeles has been favorable, and it would be nice to see an opulent production of this opulent opera.

MERCE CUNNINGHAM

San Francisco Express-Times, November 20, 1968

Note: An attack on Merce from the perspective of Ann Halprin.

Merce Cunningham has been “avant-garde” for more than fifteen years. His collaborators have included some of the furthest-out musicians and artists on the New York scene—men now in their forties and fifties; and he is regarded by the world at large as the last word in dance daring. In response to this reputation and to the art-combining aspect of dance, his performances at Berkeley November 9 and 10 attracted two sold-out houses of people from every kind of scene in the Bay Area. The ability to attract talented people in other fields is a good criterion of how alive an art is, and by this standard Cunningham is certainly alive.

Cunningham’s dance style is a formalization of his own personal and mildly eccentric movement ideas. His movements, and those he trains his dancers to imitate, are full of disjointed angularity. Many sequences are as if an originally fluid motion were electrically altered, so that some limbs, but not all, would go in slightly perverse directions. The body, normally a natural grouping of forces of which we are more or less aware, becomes a seemingly chance meeting-place for a myriad independently inspired movements. And then these strange sequences are periodically and abruptly halted, in the manner of film stills, so that we, as audience, may contemplate the curious new formations which have emerged. Sometimes this all seems almost purely abstract; sometimes it gives hint of a winsomely emotional communicativeness. Unfortunately the amount of variety, from dance to dance, is small. And Cunningham seems stronger in individual choreography than in the patterning of groups: often with more than three onstage (the company numbers nine) the movements lose coherence or fall into rather tired formal clichés. But certainly his dances are conceived, rehearsed, and performed with extraordinary virtuosity, especially by Cunningham himself.

Beyond his gifts as a choreographer, Cunningham is famed for his reconsideration of the relation of the arts within the theater. In dance as in opera the audience is assaulted by a combination of arts. It has always been assumed that some conscious authority would oversee this fusion, organizing things in a *harmonious* manner. Cunningham and his collab-

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orators work almost totally independently of one another, and their performances thus represent a continuously new coming together of their elements.

The results are odd. Certainly Cunningham is, within his limits, a diverting mover; David Tudor, La Monte Young, Gordon Mumma, and John Cage are intriguing musical manipulators, and the latter a droll and theatrical storyteller; and Lord knows Robert Rauschenberg and especially Andy Warhol are visually gifted. And certainly it is fascinating to see the kind of random interaction such a disjunctive encounter brings.

The trouble is, Cunningham is creating in a different world than the others. Cunningham is an old-time dancer with a capital D. His “avant-gardism” consists, like that of many, many others, in abandoning ballet clichés—and even establishment modern dance clichés—and admitting into dance, some fifteen years ago, a new vocabulary of gesture and movement formerly considered “beyond” art. But everything is still very tightly controlled. Cunningham and all of his dancers owe a great deal to ballet and to ballet training. It is really disconcerting, especially with a Warhol “set” or a Cage “score,” to watch Cunningham and his dancers: will they *make a mistake*? Cunningham’s dancers are an extension of Cunningham’s personality. They express their own selves as performers have always done: through others’ ideas and movements.

Cunningham is in a different world because he has quite deliberately chosen to hold back from the new freedom, to maintain structures. At a Cunningham concert the dancers’ improvisation is nonexistent, as is any attempt to involve the audience in any but the traditional ways. Thus in the most recent work shown, *Walkaround Time*, with its elaborate middle section of supposedly postperformance informality, with the dancers throwing on sweaters and ambling conversationally around the stage, my main reaction was one of pained annoyance: how odd to see a bunch of uptight New York dancers *pretending* to relax!

It is, for better or for worse, a different world. Maybe Cunningham is right, maybe discipline and initial repression of individuality free one from the lazy confines of the natural into the artificially artful. Maybe those who believe—like, consciously or unconsciously, his own collaborators—in a freer, more open kind of life are misguided dilettantes who in their attempts to naturalize art and to confer on life the quality of art are simply diluting the precious drops of art into the dreary and threatening sea of life. Maybe. Maybe not.