

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Ain't misbehavin'

by [John Gross](#)

On the critical oeuvre of John Simon.

Most theater critics deal in perishable wares. Their work serves its turn; then it can be laid to rest, never again to be revisited (except, perhaps, by theater historians). But a few—a very few—critics resist this hard fate. They are still worth reading long after most of the productions they write about have been forgotten. What they have to say, and the way that they say it, are of permanent interest.

Is John Simon a member of this select band? The recently published collection of his theater criticism makes the implicit claim that he is.<sup>[1]</sup> It runs to well over 800 pages. It is beautifully produced. It ranges back from the near-present to productions which came and went over thirty years ago. It's a big book, whichever way you look at it—and no one who wasn't a front-rank critic would deserve to have his work preserved at such length, or with such care.

Any doubts I might have had about the sheer scale of the undertaking soon melted away when I began reading. The qualities which make Simon a notable critic are evident from the outset; cumulatively they more than justify the act of reclamation that the book represents. Wit, keen intelligence, fearlessness, a mastery of *le mot juste* (and *le mot deadly*)—that these should leap from its pages will come as no surprise to anyone who knows Simon's work from the magazines. But when you read him in bulk you also gain a heightened awareness of the energy and tension in his writing—of the feeling it conveys that to be a critic is to put yourself on trial, too, and of the sharpness and freshness of response which make you constantly curious about what is coming next.

The longest piece in the book is an account of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, which was prompted by a visiting British production, but is far more of a general essay than a review. (It could easily have been a paper read at an academic symposium, though the audience would have been uncommonly lucky to have found itself listening to something so lively.) Simon takes full advantage of the unwonted amount of space at his disposal. He explores the play's multiple possibilities in closely argued detail. He considers the views of a small galaxy of commentators (Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Jean Giraudoux, among others), and brings his multilingual skills to bear on the original French. All this is impressive; but something is lost, too, in comparison with Simon's shorter reviews—the concentrated impact of his response to the dramatic event. He would have made an excellent professor of theater studies, but he found his true *métier* as a critic in the stalls.

Not that the short or shortish reviews are lacking in analytic power. On the contrary, it is remarkable how much analysis Simon packs in, how skilfully he can not only evoke and assess a production in a few paragraphs, but anatomize it as well. Whenever he feels that there is something, as he puts it, "for the mind to feed on," he sets about drawing necessary distinctions, testing a playwright's or a director's logic, teasing out intentions and asking how far they match effects. Try him, for instance,

on *Cyrano de Bergerac* as a fairy-tale for adults, or on Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* as "a moral and artistic embarrassment," on the contradictions of David Mamet's *Oleanna*, or on why Neil Simon isn't Eugene O'Neill (a slightly more relevant comparison, as he explains, than might first appear). Consider what he has to say about the indestructibility ("not to be confused with perfection") of *Our Town*, or about how, amid all its cynical and hard-edged revelations, Arthur Schnitzler's *Undiscovereda Undiscovered Country* "maintains a little twilight of mystery and ambiguity—allows room for the indefinable where your imagination must grope its way toward hypothesis."

In all these cases, and in hundreds of others, his diagnoses seem to me both accurate and eloquent. For an example of his finesse in separating what's sound in a play from what's false, I recommend his review of *The Elephant Man*. (The falsities mostly stem from the author's reading modern assumptions into Victorian material.) And for an example of hitting the nail briefly and straightforwardly on the head, you couldn't do much better than his account of the way in which the people in Alan Ayckbourn's plays are "both silly and wise":

They are neither unduly clever nor outrageously dim-witted, but of average intelligence and average stupidity in a sturdy amalgam. And they can make fools of others and themselves with equal ease, thanks to either quality. They are funny not because they are smarter or more foolish than the rest of us, but because they are exactly like us, only in a slightly tightened, sharpened version, to make a particular brand of lop-sidedness reveal its bias more theatrically.

One major source of strength in his work is an exceptional breadth of culture. (This is even more apparent in his music criticism.) He doesn't parade his knowledge; his cultural allusions are almost always casual and unforced. But you never doubt that the knowledge is there, or that it has a living value for him. In his play *Amadeus*, Peter Shaffer gets Mozart wrong. Does that mean that a genuine imaginative re-creation of the composer is impossible? Not necessarily, says Simon, and directs our attention to *Mozart on the Journey to Prague*, a novella by the nineteenth-century poet Eduard Morike. *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is adapted for the stage, and horribly diminished in the process. Simon recoils, and the anger which runs through his review derives from a firm and palpably first-hand sense of the novel's power.

Many professional theater critics live in an enclosed world. It is theater, theater to the horizon's edge. Simon doesn't qualify as a man of theater in that narrow sense. He has too many other interests. But there is an underlying enthusiasm for theater in his criticism nonetheless. Not for most of what actually gets put on stage, of course, but for the theater's brighter potentialities and the occasions when they are realized.

Certainly he doesn't stint the superlatives. You don't have to go very far in his work before you come across a "wonderful," a "magnificent," or a "superb." In part this kind of language comes with the territory. In the theater, as I know from my own time as a critic, you have to raise your voice if you want to be heard at all: it is a world in which "excellent" tends to be regarded as rather grudging and "outstanding" is no big deal. Still, Simon's accolades seldom sound perfunctory. You can sense the genuine feeling behind them, the pleasure he takes in a good play or a good performance—or, one should add, a good show, since it is a pleasure which extends without inhibition to the more popular forms of theater. He rejoices in *Ain't Misbehavin'* no less than he does in the *Comédie Française*. He goes overboard (as well he might) for Barry Humphries in *Dame Edna: The Royal Tour*.

His general standards are high without, I would say, being excessively severe. He writes warmly about plays which are excellent of their kind without necessarily being masterpieces. He often makes you regret having missed a production. Even when he has reservations, some of his appraisals—of *Angels in America*, for instance, or of David Hare's *Plenty*—strike me as erring on the side of

generosity.

At this point I can imagine an incredulous reader exclaiming, “You are talking about *the* John Simon? The famous slash-and-burn John Simon? The Holy Terror of Broadway, the dark assassin of Off-Broadway?” And yes, it is that John Simon—the critic who (as Jack O’Brien reminds us in a sprightly introduction to the new book) once had a plate of pasta dumped on his head by an irate actress.

Have I exaggerated the positive elements in his criticism? I can only suggest that skeptics work their way through *On Theater*, verdict by verdict, review by review.

I believe that they will find the facts are on my side. But Simon’s reputation doesn’t come from nowhere. Criticism is a matter of tone as well as facts, of style as well as verdicts, and they will also find a great deal in the book that is scathing, blistering, and, on occasion, downright brutal.

Simon doesn’t take reputations on trust. He forcefully, even furiously, rejects the claims that are conventionally made on behalf of some of the biggest names in the modern theater—Arthur Miller, for instance, and Harold Pinter. But I don’t think that this in itself has contributed much to his bad boy legend. He is by no means a consistent iconoclast, and he willingly offers incense at other orthodox modern altars—at that of Samuel Beckett above all.

What antagonizes (and fascinates) many readers, and gratifies others, is far more likely to be his general vehemence when he is on the attack. He can be crushingly dismissive, and he takes obvious pleasure in exercising his powers of invective, in a manner which might count as an abuse of criticism if weren’t that a), he is so often witty, and b), he is so often right. Even then, I often find myself in two minds. When bad theater is not merely mediocre but opinionated and aggressive, it is a relief to find someone ready to articulate the exasperation that most of us rein in. When directors subject Shakespeare and other classics to trendy travesties, they deserve everything they get. But there is also something to be said for polite restraint, or at any rate for humanitarian understatement. Unable to decide where the balance lies, I take refuge in a piece of advice handed out by Henry James, who once told a young theater critic that he was too tender-hearted, that he should have spent more time exposing “perpetrated ineptitudes.” No one could accuse Simon of neglecting his duties in this respect.

The stormiest reactions he arouses have been provoked by his unflattering accounts of individual performers, and especially their physical presence. Here too he can point to countless precedents. Consider, for example, a passage from Leigh Hunt, the first regular English dramatic critic, discussing a prominent actor of his own day called Pope:

Mr. Pope has not one requisite to an actor but a good voice, and this he uses so unmercifully on all occasions that its value is lost, and he contrives to turn it into a defect. His face is as hard, as immovable and as void of meaning as an oak wainscoat; his eyes, which should endeavour to throw some meaning into his vociferous declamation, he generally contrives to keep almost shut; and what would make another actor merely serious is enough to put him in a passion.

Simon often writes in this vein, and very effective it can be—when he is describing the monotonous mannerisms of the actress Maggie Smith, for instance. But he also has a way of moving from performance to appearance, from expressions and movements as they affect a role to looks as an end in themselves. He is particularly hard on what he considers the lack of pulchritude in women. One poor soul is told that she has “something rheumy about the eyes, nostrils that outflare a coney’s, an overweening upper lip and a slightly pinched, high-pitched voice.” (Rather oddly she is also told that she has “a pleasing countenance.”) But men come in for some rough handling too: it’s not enough for Simon to point out that an actor has bad teeth; he has to add to that he “looks carious all over.”

I concede—how could I not?—that looks are bound to color our response to a performer, up to a point. I confess that I sometimes respond to Simon’s uncharitable characterizations with a guilty grin. But enough is enough. I suppose Simon felt he had no choice but to resurrect, thirty years on, his notorious verbal caricature of Liza Minelli (“blubber lips unable to resist the pull of gravity,” etc.): it is too much part of the record. But I regret its presence in *On Theater* all the same. Like some of his other flat-out personal assaults, it isn’t worthy of him.

In themselves, however, such things constitute only a minor blemish. The chief objection to them, for anyone who takes Simon as seriously as he deserves, is that because (like a poke in the eye) they are so easy to remember, they are liable to loom excessively large and distract attention from a vastly more important aspect of his work, his campaign against degraded cultural values. This isn’t a systematic campaign: it reflects the piecemeal provocation of whatever theatrical folly he finds himself reviewing. Discussing what sounds like a particularly dire anti-colonialist, anti-patriarchal, anti-whatever production of *The Tempest*, for instance, he observes that “in our theater as in academia, which abets it, common sense is just a vile hang-up of the prevailing but dying Europhallogocentric mentality.” Such a reflection is all the more refreshing, and all the more telling, coming from a writer who isn’t especially interested in politics, and who doesn’t have a set programme to advance. Indeed, in some ways to talk of him as a campaigner gives the wrong idea. He is far too much of an individualist for such a label, and that he should bear witness to the spirit of the age is simply one of his many excellences as a free-ranging critic.

## Notes

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1. There are two companion volumes to *On Theater*, both also published by Applause—*On Music: Criticism 1979–2005* with an introduction by Ned Rorem (504 pages, \$27.95) and *On Film: Criticism 1982–2001* with an introduction by Bruce Beresford (662 pages, \$29.95). [Go back to the text.](#)

**John Gross's** most recent book is *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (Ivan R Dee).

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