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Arts Writing Bootcamp: The National Critics Institute

by Carolyn Merritt

What role do ethics play in arts writing? Does the critic have a moral obligation to the performers and the audience? Are there universal human values to consider when assessing art works? In the absence of objectivity, what separates the professional from everyone else with an opinion? Does it matter when the critic comes from a different class, racial, ethnic, cultural background than the work's creator(s)? Who is the arts writer in conversation with? Are we obligated to the artists, the readers, ourselves? Why are we writing anyway if the average page click lasts mere seconds?

Over the course of two weeks, these and other questions of art and life formed the center of my world, while I lived in community with twelve professional and emerging arts writers at the National Critics Institute (NCI). Founded in 1968, the NCI is one of six programs housed at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in the seaside New England town of Waterford, Connecticut. Each July, the O'Neill, the oldest center for play development in the U.S., provides rehearsal space, reading time, production staff, performers, and designers for works in process—eight plays and three musical theater works—through its National Playwrights and National Musical Theater Conferences. (Summer conferences in puppetry and cabaret are held in June and August.) Two-time Pulitzer recipient August Wilson worked on several plays at the O'Neill. *Avenue Q*, *In the Heights*, *Uncommon Women and Others*, and *Nine* benefited from development there. Meryl Streep, Robert Redford, Angela Bassett, Michael Douglas, and Courtney Vance are among the stars who have passed through the Center.

This year, under the guidance of director Chris Jones, chief theater critic and a Sunday cultural columnist at the *Chicago Tribune*, and associate director Mark Charney, chair of Theatre and Dance at Texas Tech University, NCI fellows attended works in development at the O'Neill, saw regional theater in Massachusetts and Connecticut, spent a day with the dance gods at Jacob's Pillow, dined out on assignment in historic Mystic, and screened a classic film. Guest teachers included Pulitzer-winning dance critic Sarah Kaufman, entertainment and culture writer Mark Caro, Beard Award-winning food writer Tejal Rao, film critic Michael Phillips, theater critics Ben Brantley and Peter Marks, and editor-in-chief of TDF (Theatre Development Fund) Stages, Mark Blankenship. We wrote and workshopped writing with such intensity it took me weeks to relax my body out of the keyboard hunch. We talked about the work and

why it matters—both the art itself and the critical response—and compared notes on the state of each in our respective cities. We pooled our laundry. Wrote and socialized at the campus pub. Shared camp-style meals on the back porch of the Center’s mansion, overlooking the verdant grounds that roll gently toward Waterford Beach Park. Walked to the beach at midnight.



Waterford Beach Park

We had the privilege of living in community with the writers, composers, actors, directors, and other production professionals engaged in the Center’s playwrighting and musical theater conferences. If the wall between artist and critic is fuzzy-to-porous in Philadelphia’s dance scene, it remains more solid in much of the theater world. Part of the magic of the O’Neill is its openness, the sense that these divisions might dissolve, if temporarily, and that in that dissolution we might recognize that theater (or any discipline) and its critical response are equally forms of art.

NCI Fellows agree not to publish their reviews of works in development at the O’Neill, so I include excerpts of some of my responses to works and experiences outside the Center.

July 5 - Theater: *Rose Tattoo*, Williamstown Theatre Festival

Elsewhen. More specifically, early 1950s America. Hindsight allows historians to label this era the apex of homogeneity in the country, but in Tennessee Williams’ *The Rose Tattoo*, it is a world of hot-blooded immigrants, exuberant hand gestures, exotic animals of lawn and flesh. With a cast headed by Marisa Tomei, America’s beloved “white ethnic” starlet, the Williamstown Theatre Festival transports us there on a flying carpet of the senses, through a dreamy landscape sufficiently anchored in historic detail. Along the way, we can ponder the simple beauty of Italian folk music, the anguish of heartache, the pitfalls of assimilation, the ever-thorny business of identity, difference, and belonging in this nation of immigrants.

Tomei is the obvious choice for the earthy, exuberantly sexual Serafina Delle Rose, a woman as enamored of her husband of nearly two decades as the day they married. Serafina sashays and spins with abandon, peppers her English with a heavy dose of Italian, loudly proclaims the frequency of their ecstatic lovemaking, gesticulates with such fervor, you might wonder at the contents of her medicine cabinet. Indeed, you might wonder a lot of things. Like, did married couples have so much sex, after so many years together, back then? Back to the medicine cabinet, did these newly arrived immigrants use birth control? The numbers don't add up to their lone daughter. When did they find the time, what with all the bootstrap pulling? Serafina is no June Cleaver, she is a seamstress with a bustling home business. Above the sweeping backdrop of pink lawn flamingos and ever-rolling ocean waves, we see telephone poles and crisscrossed wires. Serafina dreams of modern conveniences like "a deep freeze," so perhaps all that sex was simply life before TV.

July 6 - Dance: Gauthier Dance, Jacob's Pillow, Becket, MA

A lush current rises from Garazi Perez Oloriz's [root chakra](#), ripples up her torso, flicks out her fingertips. Her upper half hovers over a floor-length white tutu, sweeps to the floor in capacious circles that loop out her long blonde hair. And then she is aloft. Perched on Maurus Gauthier's shoulders, her skirt conceals all but his legs. A puffy white bud on stilts. This simple illusion, the center of Chiung-Tai Huang's *Floating Flowers* (2014), elicits quiet gasps, introduces the audience to the image-rich, often humorous delights of Gauthier Dance.

Smoke rolls over the stage as the lights rise on two rows of Weimar-era cigarette folk, decked out in stiff oxfords and shorts, black knee-highs and equestrian hats. With razor-sharp precision, they jut hats, hips, heads in a nod to Fosse's *Cabaret*, slice legs through space like missiles. Against the bombastically melancholic backdrop of Almodovar-appropriated Mexican *boleros*, Cayetano Soto's *CONRAZONCORAZON* (2015) is a poetic meditation on the romantic side of militarism.

July 9 - Theater: *Bye Bye Birdie*, Goodspeed Opera House, East Haddam, CT

(*Instructions: Be Funny)

These were the days when men could be men and women could be women. And everyone knew who was who, by the way. Isn't it still lovely to be a woman? To bask in the pleasures of mascara, lipstick, high heels, the security of your boyfriend's pin, the warmth of a whistling man's approbation.

Weren't we better off when we didn't know the intimate details of everyone's lives? Alcoholism, incest, domestic abuse, "marital rape." These things are really rather unpleasant. Racism, sexism.... All those *isms* begin to get confusing. Where has all this consciousness-raising gotten us, anyhow?

Take me back, Birdie. Lay my apron by the ironing board. Pour me a tall glass of Tang. Better yet, make it a martini. A double. I'll bring the barbiturates.

July 12 - Food: Daniel Packer Inne, Mystic, CT

Oversized moonstones from the sea, resting silkily in rock-faced wombs. Metallic-tinged, milk-white hollow flips to a craggy exterior—each shell matching the wonder of its contents. You can toss them back neatly, their plunge thrilling as a waterslide. Or let them roll softly, prolong the caressing play of brine, wet, sweet. Chase with your poison of choice, ideally something crisp to shore up all that slippery tenderness. A delight for consideration, the oyster invites its beholding, props open the palate, primes the mouth and gut alike into a state of relaxed wellbeing.

July 13 - Film: *Only Angels Have Wings*, Howard Hawks (1939)

"Things happen awful fast around here." Just hours off the boat in the fictional South American port town of Barranca, traveling entertainer Bonnie Lee has already lost one date to a plane crash, been shaken out of her sorrow and seduced by his tough-talking

boss, only to have him leave her in the dust. Cary Grant explains the speed: he's the lead man to Jean Arthur's Bonnie in the role of Geoff Carter, a coldblooded heartbreaker married to his job as pilot and manager of Barranca Airways. In Howard Hawks' 1939 classic *Only Angels Have Wings*, recently reissued on a Criterion 4K digital restoration, Grant's stardom is harnessed to immunize Carter from his own behavior, to propel this romance in the air and on the ground.

If the love story wouldn't fly among contemporary sensibilities, cinematographer Joseph Walker's aviation scenes capture the solitary, high stakes nature of monoplane flight in its Golden Age. He follows the planes' dips, dives, twists like a lover. Carter wants everyone to believe he'd "never ask any woman for anything." He saves that for his planes and pilots, and the real romance of the film takes off from there.

The questions we contemplated over our two weeks at the NCI remain with me. Perhaps that is the best criteria for arts writers or critics—curiosity. A desire to ask, to understand, to think through the process of writing, to peel away the layers, and in the process to get closer to the thing itself, to ourselves and to others.

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