

The Critic as Thinker

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7:30 p.m.

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Francis Levy

Nersessian: Edward Nersessian

Copeland: Roger Copeland

Bentley: Eric Bentley

Brustein: Robert Brustein

Kauffmann: Stanley Kauffmann

Kalb: Jonathan Kalb

Levy: My name is Francis Levy and I'm Co-Director of the Philoctetes Center. Ed Nersessian is the other Co-Director. Welcome to *The Critic as Thinker*. Two of our panelists were teachers of mine at the Yale School of Drama. I just wanted to say that I'm very happy to see them. I welcome them, and I'm honored that they've come to join us for this particular panel. I'm now pleased to introduce Roger Copeland. Roger Copeland is a professor of theatre and dance at Oberlin College. He has written about theatre, dance and film for a wide variety of publications including *The New York Times*, *Partisan Review*, *The New Republic*, *American Theatre*, *The Village Voice* and *The Drama Review* and many other periodicals. His film *Camera Obscura* won the festival award at the Three Rivers Arts Festival in Pittsburgh in 1985. In 2000, he was recipient of the Stagebill Award for theatre journalism. His books include the widely used anthology, *What is Dance?* and *Merce Cunningham: The Modernizing of Modern Dance*. He recently wrote and directed a feature length film entitled *The Unrecovered*, a fictional narrative about conspiratorial thinking in the aftermath of 9/11, which actually showed here at the Philoctetes Center over a year ago. Roger Copeland will moderate this afternoon's panel and introduce our other distinguished panelists.

Copeland: So those of you who haven't been in the audience for any earlier events at the Philoctetes Center may be wondering what connection, if any, exists between this afternoon's panel and the building in which we're housed, which is the New York Psychoanalytic Society. Well, it's really easy: our topic this afternoon is drama and theatre criticism as practiced by serious, intelligent adults. Any such person who continues to write about drama or theatre in this country at this point in the 21st century clearly needs to have his or her head examined, so case closed.

Also, appearances to the contrary, this afternoon's panel is not being commercially sponsored or subsidized by either Geritol or Centrum Silver. For the first time ever, I am beginning to suspect maybe I chose the right occupation. I know I'm never going to produce a body of work like Eric Bentley's or Robert Brustein's or Stanley Kauffmann's, but if, when I'm in my 80s or 90s, I could just have their bodies, I'd be pretty happy. The three panelists sitting around this table are three of the hardest, long-distance runners in the business. Because all three of them have been so tirelessly productive for so many years, the task of introducing them and doing justice to their achievements without using up the whole two hours is going to be nearly impossible.

One of Eric Bentley's earliest books is called *A Century of Hero Worship*, and I'm going to have to restrain myself during these intros from succumbing to hero worship, since these three titans of the theatre are, indeed, personal heroes of mine. So it's a very moving experience for me to be able to sit here with them. Despite my very strongly secular leanings, I think it's fair to say that I worship them in an almost religious manner. So here goes. No delusions of adequacy about doing justice to the warp and woof of their careers, but here's my attempt at an introduction.

Eric Bentley, to my left, is a playwright, a critic, a scholar, and seems like a gentleman, too. I just met him. For those of you who may not be lucky enough to know this, he is also a marvelous cabaret performer, something that seems only fitting for the man who did more than anyone else to introduce the work of Bertolt Brecht to America. Eric was the drama critic for *The New Republic* from 1952-1956. He taught for many years at Columbia. Am I right—you were actually a student at Columbia?

Bentley: I was, indeed.

Copeland: Unbelievable. His plays include *Lord Alfred's Lover*, which is the best play I know about Oscar Wilde, and *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, about spinelessness during the McCarthy era. His critical works include *The Playwright as Thinker*, *What is Theater*, a great book about Bernard Shaw—I think it's just called *Bernard Shaw*—and *The Life of the Drama*, which began as the Norton Lectures at Harvard. Mr. Bentley was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1997.

Robert Brustein, to my right, is currently University Senior Research Fellow and former Professor of English at Harvard, where he was also the founding Artistic Director of the American Repertory Theatre. Now, many of us in this room know him best as Dean Brustein, the former Dean of the Yale School of Drama who, in the mid 1960s almost single-handedly whipped a place that had fallen into lethargic decline into a whole new shape and a whole new life. He's been theatre critic for *The New Republic* since 1959, although I fear, technically speaking, that may not still completely be the case. That's one of the scandals, I think, that we may want to talk about this afternoon. The person that I will always know as Dean Brustein is also the author of an immense number of books—15 books about theatre and society. His most recent book, *Millennial Stages*, was published just last year. A new book, *Shakespeare's Prejudices*, will see the light of print next year. He has also written many full length plays, including *Demons*, *Nobody Dies on Friday*, and a delightful new play that I just read a couple months ago, about a certain Will Shakespeare and a certain Kit Marlowe, called *The English Channel*.

Stanley Kauffmann has been the film critic for *The New Republic* since before a lot of people in this room were born. He's probably best known to a lot of you as one of the few truly major film critics of the second half of the 20th century. Now, this afternoon, even though he's not wearing a hat, he is going to put on, metaphorically, one of his other hats—his theatre critic hat. Because at various points in his long professional career, Stanley has served as the theatre critic for Channel 13 in New York, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, and some really obscure publication—I'm not even sure if it's still around—The New York March of Dimes. It rhymes

with “dimes”—something like that. His latest book is a group of memoirs entitled *Albums of a Life*. One of those memoirs is about his eight months for that newspaper of record, something that I’m sure we’ll want to get into this afternoon.

Before we do that, let’s make sure that we’re all on the same page, or if not the same page, at least the same book. That book is, of course, *The Playwright as Thinker*, the book that provided the title for today’s panel, *The Critic as Thinker*. I’m not proposing that this afternoon’s gabfest be an examination of the Bentley legacy, pure and simple, but I think it’s a very logical place for us to start, because it seems to me that this great book, first published in 1946, is indisputably *the* great study of post-war drama, and I think you can really make a claim that it is the greatest book about drama written in the 20th century. Now, I don’t want to put words into Bob’s mouth or Stanley’s mouth, but I suspect they’d agree with me that it’s hard to think of another book that did more to create the climate in which serious American drama and theatre might have thrived in the second half of the 20th century, if indeed it did thrive.

So let me turn to the youngest, most impressionable member of the panel, that young whippersnapper Bob Brustein, who studied under Eric at Columbia, and ask him about the significance of Eric’s great book coming, as it did, right after the war. Did the scales sort of fall from your eyes? What sort of impact did it have on you as a younger man?

Brustein: Let me begin by saying how privileged and happy I am to be here with these distinguished gentlemen and progenitors of all the things you spoke about, and with many of my old students—Anne Cattaneo, Jerry Carter, Bob Marx, Francis Levy and Roger Copeland. There are others in the room that I haven’t identified. It makes the point that the theatre, and criticism as well, is a kind of continuum. There is a lot of feeding going on—a lot of symbiosis going on. You can’t make a move, really, without affecting somebody in this particular field. And you hope that that move is positive rather than negative.

I can certainly attest to the impact that Eric Bentley’s *Playwright as Thinker* had on me. I had been a student at the Yale School of Drama for a year in 1948. I was appalled, actually, at the fact that we would end our experience of watching a play, and we’d talk about the acting, we’d talk about the directing, we’d talk about the technical work, we’d talk about the lighting, talk about the management, but we would never, ever, talk about the play. I found in Eric’s book a testimony to this fact. When I got to Yale, we read plays in synopsisized forms, and the way we responded to the plays was to say how many characters, how many sets, where it’s placed, what the particular period is, but we never, ever talked about the play.

To come upon this book, and to read what Eric had to say about the intellectual content of plays, the artistic content of plays, the way that playwrights influenced each other, the various styles and contrary but nevertheless unified approaches to the theatre that one found from the 19th century to the present time, really had an untold influence on me, and this man’s name became magic to me. I also just recently thought, in preparing for this panel, that I would look back over the book, and came across some passages, which I hope I haven’t lost. I’ll just try to paraphrase them. Here they are. He speaks of the need for setting up theatres in colleges: “The college theatre should beware of totally excluding, on principal, anything but the current commodities of Broadway and the hopeful efforts of our friend who has written a play.” He gives four different

things that he thinks colleges or universities should do. They should attend themselves to the classics—the great classics of the past. They should deal with new plays as much as possible. They should deal with modern classics, and they should deal with the forgotten play. I didn't know I was doing that, but when I went to Yale and I started the Yale Reparatory Theatre, we really started a theatre that was built on the principals that Eric had enunciated in this book. I've been trying to do it ever since, up until five years ago, when I retired from running the American Reparatory Theatre.

There was one other thing that he said that I found quite stunning as well, and that had to do with his attack on those who would attack what is now called “elitism.” He was holding out for a theatre that had intelligence, artistry, creativity, and did not, as he said—or as Chekhov so famously said—“bring Gogol down to the people, but brought the people up to Gogol.” I never forgot that and I never will forget it. It's something that I've tried very much to fight for, in his tradition, when we do plays, and in my own criticism. So I'll stop there with expressing my gratitude to my old teacher Eric Bentley, who really had a big impact on virtually everything I did.

Copeland: Stanley, do you want to talk at all about your initial reaction to the book?

Kauffmann: Well, I have two debts to pay at once. First is to Bob, who gave me a job. He employed me at the Yale School of Drama and made me a teacher, which I had never thought of doing. I'd done a lot of other things—lectures—but I never thought of being a teacher. He made me one, and that's been the blessing of my life. A lot of the people here today are the fruits of that blessing, and I'll never stop being grateful to him for that. I'm not even going into what his intellect is—just that fact.

Then there's Mr. Bentley, who is at once, for me, a burning inspiration—absolutely a burning inspiration—and also a great humiliator. I took a look through *The Playwright as Thinker*, preparing for this occasion. Page after page, I saw things that I thought I had said, he had said 30 years earlier. Delving further into the works of Bob and Eric, if I may call you by your first names—

Brustein: We've been colleagues since 1959.

Kauffmann: I'll just interrupt with one anecdote. I used to be an editor at Knopf, as Ellen, who worked there, knows. My first acquaintance with Bob is that I read his theatre criticism in *Partisan Review* and *Harper's* and got in touch and had lunch with him, trying to get him as an author for Knopf. Declined.

Brustein: My agent declined. I wanted to publish *Theatre of Revolt* with Knopf, and my agent wouldn't let me. They didn't offer enough money.

Kauffmann: Just to conclude this opening bit, looking again at Bob's work, and looking again at *The Playwright as Thinker* this past week, I realized that this meeting is simply a continuum. Every decade, every year, every month, there's moaning about the condition of the theatre. And it's all true. Shaw said once, “The theatre is always in a low estate.” If you look at an anthology

of great plays from the Greeks to today, you think, “My god, what a panorama of achievement.” Then you look at the dates and you see that hundreds of years elapsed between one play and the next. Sometimes we have the bad luck to be caught between. All I’m trying to say, seriously, is that it’s important that these complaints go on—that they be enlightened and progressive as complaints. That is, I hope, what we’re going to try to do today.

Copeland: Eric, do you want to talk at all about the reception of the book? I mean, you must have been vilified in many quarters of the American theatre, especially the commercial American theatre, which was pretty much all that existed in 1946. Anything you want to say about the way in which the book was received?

Bentley: Well, it’s very advantageous to receive a lot of attacks. You get attention. The only thing worse than being talked about, as Oscar Wilde said, is not being talked about. *The Playwright as Thinker* was a peculiar event for me because I never predicted the way it turned out. I never intended most of the things that happened, both the negative and the positive. I did want, and I continued after that book, to attack what was the establishment in the universities, in drama departments, plus what was the establishment in New York, the more highbrow end of Broadway—you know, the Maxwell Andersons. They were the enemy as far as I was concerned. This was, in part, political. I was, at the time, a young Englishman, and a member of the Independent Labor Party in London, which was a Marxist party, called by the communists “Trotskyites.” We didn’t regard ourselves as such. We were very anti-Soviet, but also fundamentally anti-capitalist. Although I perhaps wasn’t as open about that as I might have been in the early drama criticism, this was the impetus. The only critic that commented on me at that time that was wise to what was going on was George Jean Nathan. George Jean Nathan reviewed *The Playwright as Thinker*. He’s attacked in it on one page. He took that in very good part, as you would expect if you knew George Jean Nathan. He got in a few nice quips at me. He said, “Sometimes beneath the academic gown, the stuffed shirt is mildly visible.”

Well, I didn’t mind being called a stuffed shirt vis-à-vis George Nathan, but what he found, that none of the other critics found, was in what became my notorious attack on Eugene O’Neill, if you can call it that. He said, “It’s the British attitude to American culture that makes Bentley the English critic of O’Neill. He’s saying what the other English critics have said.” It occurred to me at that time that this is probably true—all of it. I was a British subject. The drama criticism I had known as a boy in the ‘30s was that of James Agate and St John Ervine in the two Sunday papers in London. And that was anti-O’Neill. They were also anti-Clifford Odets in a way I wasn’t, because I shared the political radicalism there—that was true. But what they didn’t get, and what they didn’t get later, when I continued, was that there was a social criticism of the middlebrow Broadway. I’ve always loathed Broadway, and not just on Marxist grounds, though there, too, but on the grounds of the pretentious middlebrow culture that was there regnant in the Playwright’s Company, the Theatre Guild, and so on. That was what I was consciously doing. None of that really came out in the discussion, though I should say that that book—I hope it’s not my best, because I hope one or two of the others are better—attracted too much attention from my later career, so to speak, if I can think selfishly for the moment. America has no second act. I could have no second act, you see, after that. And when I wrote things I much more wanted to write and thought was perhaps doing better, there was no attention left because it wasn’t as controversial.

When I wrote *The Playwright as Thinker*, I was prepared to be outrageous. I wasn't too arrogant, and I wasn't suffering from overconfidence. It wasn't that. It was just that I wanted to be heard, and by god, I was, to my surprise. Various people in the establishment came on my side. For instance, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, which was second only to *The New York Times* as an upholder of the middlebrow culture leapt to my support. They produced what was probably the most influential review of the time, which had the headline, "Mr. Bentley Swings an Axe." Well, I guess I did, but I hadn't been aware of doing anything of the kind. It was because a kind of violence against the sacred theatre guild—against the gods. Despite my attitude to Brecht, I wasn't even pro Kurt Weill because he was in his Broadway phase. He was also homophobic, which was another point which we weren't so open about in those days. But it was a very strange situation. I was a provincial little boy, in American terms, working for a small college in North Carolina. But when I came to New York for Christmas to see some shows—I saw the opening of a few plays that became famous by Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller—I was immediately picked up by the people who were reviewing *The Playwright as Thinker*. Barrett Clark, who had a big radio program with all the Broadway stars coming on, wanted to talk with me, as it happened. I remember some of the little experiences that may amuse some of you now. Various dignitaries from the Broadway world that I had attacked were invited to come on the program, and some did. But one that refused was Lillian Hellman. And the fact is, she isn't mentioned in *The Playwright as Thinker*. I value that to this day.

Brustein: She was mentioned in a lot in your reviews, though.

Bentley: I had seen some of her work. I knew she was communistically inclined, and therefore on the left as we thought of it in those days. But I had not had the usual middlebrow reproach to her as a writer. In other words, I did not think she was a great truth-teller on the stage. She wasn't the answer. She wasn't the playwright as thinker.

The other day I read in *The New York Review of Books*—this week's issue—that the view of O'Neill expressed in *The Playwright as Thinker* has now been found to be invalid by an academic critic who happens to live one floor beneath me in my New York apartment house—Jack Diggins. Jack Diggins has discovered that O'Neill was a thinker, and I have said he wasn't. Well, look at that. First of all, I said this during World War II, before O'Neill's best plays were known to the world. All his best plays came out, or were released by him, after the War. Anyway, Diggins, of course, has a friendly relation with me. He may not have after this, because Diggins is a thinker—a political scientist, an expert on Max Weber and things like that. He can't present O'Neill as an expert on those people, or thinking along those lines. It's just fantastic. Who knows how to think among playwrights? Well, obviously Bernard Shaw. He thinks too much, you might say. You couldn't stop that brain thinking and thinking. And there are others. But O'Neill is surely not one of them. I mean, if you take *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a play about American history and the Civil War that's serious—as a historian, it's not serious as history. It's just a backdrop for a composer of melodrama. So I don't have to tell Jack Diggins that I later said other things about O'Neill when I'd read better plays by him. What I said initially is true, by and large—that O'Neill and the plays that he wrote during World War II were really good. They are plays of feeling about his family. The more he came just through the

memory of his childhood and who his parents were, the more he could write—magnificent writing, away from all the books he'd read and all the thinkers he thought about.

Copeland: And all that pseudo-German Expressionist stuff that he was jettisoning too.

Brustein: Aren't you saying, Eric, that he was better when he wasn't thinking?

Bentley: Yes, that's right.

Brustein: And that some playwrights are better when they're not thinking.

Bentley: I wanted to say something about Bob's kind remarks to me. When people are kind enough to refer to successes of mine, I think of the many failures that have weighed me down, maybe more than they should have, if I'd had more real strength. I would like to mention this one, because it refers to Bob. When I came to Columbia, I was brought there having in mind that I would replace Joseph Wood Krutch, a professor of drama, and that I would create, in a new arts center Columbia was going to have, a new theatre department and a repertory theatre. In this, for various reasons not to be mentioned here, I failed. My students, however, went to two other universities and did it in both places. So I couldn't feel anything but, shall we say, envy, jealousy. Certainly they were not ugly passions, but I did wish it was me. Those were the things I had wanted to do and I didn't do. I did some other things instead, perforce. If I had anything to do with Bob doing so, I'll gladly take the credit, but I think of my time at Columbia as having failed in its main purpose. It must have been partly because of me. I can't blame that on everybody else.

Brustein: Eric, it wasn't because of you, because I went through the same process at Columbia. There was an effort to create an art school at Columbia, and a man was hired named Davidson Taylor, who was the vice president in charge of programming at CBS. He was hired to interview a number of us about what should happen at a school of the arts at Columbia. And naturally, a number of us thought maybe we might be in a position to take over that school and develop it, and I'm sure you were being interviewed in the same way. I met with him one day and we spoke for about three hours, and I was called back about six months later. I thought, "This is interesting." He called me back and asked me exactly the same questions as if he didn't even know. They finally did appoint a dean, and the dean was Davidson Taylor.

Bentley: I remember that. That was after my failures.

Brustein: That wasn't your failure. It was doomed to be what it was going to be.

Bentley: Before I stop, there's one thing that I wanted to say that is not connected with what we are currently talking about. One thing I hadn't absorbed completely when I wrote *The Playwright as Thinker*, or any of my early works, was the following: that people talk about "the drama critics." What the term means when they use it is not clear, because there are two quite different enterprises involved.

Copeland: Drama and theatre, yes.

Bentley: One is the thing that's familiar to the general public, because they're involved in it. It is that, if we're taking Broadway—which was, for me, the enemy, and what for good Americans is the center of thing—what the Broadway theatre needs is a consumer guide. That's what the critics should—the so-called “critics” in quotes—should provide. *The New York Times* did provide it in the supplement they had until last year for television programs—for films that were on television. They'd give you a one-line statement, which were often quite witty and full of content—a good consumer guide. You knew when you read that one line, which, for a long time, was edited by the same journalist. But he's gone now. They've got several people doing it. Broadway theatre just needs a consumer guide, or the public wants it. Put it this way: tickets are very expensive. People think nothing, nowadays, of \$100 for a ticket. The people that can pay it think nothing of it. Before you spend that money, even though you're rich, you want a little guidance as to whether it's going to be well spent. I thought the critics in that area—and I would have been perfectly willing to function in that way at one time in my life—could evaluate the shows instead of going at it academically, “A, B, C and D.” Say, “This is a \$100 show. It's worth \$100. This one's worth \$75. This one's \$25. This isn't worth it.” You could become quite skillful at economic evaluations.

Copeland: Putting your mouth where your money is. Absolutely right.

Bentley: Guiding the public. The public has a right—the rich public—to get something for its riches, you know? A little guidance. That's all right, and it is a form of criticism, just as when you come out of the movies on Saturday night and grunt, that's a form of criticism. So everybody is a critic in that sense. They all deny they are, but they are. They come out either overjoyed that it's wonderful, or the opposite. That's a critical reaction. That's what it's all about. That's one province. But when we highbrows, in this room, talk about great critical writing, we're not thinking about that sort of thing at all. We're divorced from that situation in our minds, and we're thinking of brilliant articles that we read in books, reprinted, by George Bernard Shaw, or by Max Beerbohm, or by Stark Young. We're thinking about excellent writing about the theatrical art. Now, you could say that, functionally, people in the newspapers are just doing the first sort of thing—the consumer guide—or should be. And the people in the weeklies, monthlies, etcetera, are free to do the best they can as critics of an art. People are writing skillfully about the art as art, not as sociology or anything else, the way they do in the graduate schools, but about the art as art. And you become good at it. The theatrical criticism has one difference from the literary, in that the theatrical critic becomes knowing and sensitive to different degrees of merit in performance. For instance, your ordinary newspaper commentator doesn't know the difference between a star and a great actor. But the real critic does. The so-called average critic doesn't know the difference between a good performance and a great performance, or an adequate performance and a superb performance. These gradations call for discrimination. Shaw, when he wrote about it, would be able to give you why so-and-so is a better actress than so-and-so. If you're someone who's into the theatre art, then you're into real artistic criticism on the same level as literary criticism that doesn't deal with the theatre.

That's what I wanted to mention, appearing here. That's why I didn't find anything about this in *The Playwright as Thinker*, I don't think—because I hadn't yet done theatre criticism. I got into that world later. I had just attacked Broadway, which is a good thing to do in a book published

by Reynal and Hitchcock and later in a magazine that I worked for, *The New Republic*, which, whatever its ups and downs politically, has always been rather high in its standards in criticism of the performing arts and of the literary arts. That's where you have to go. I've always, in my American career, after my English beginnings, been attached to these two enemy weekly publications, *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. With all their ups and downs and strange faults, it is precious to someone like me that they were there.

Copeland: Speaking of the kind of adversarial criticism that we're describing, and that the three of you practice, it seems to me there's another variation on it that Bob has been a principal pioneer of, and that is: What do you do, as somebody writing about the theatre on a regular basis, when the vast majority of what you see fails miserably? You then decide you're going to focus on the cultural malaise that underlies that failure. I don't know if you want to talk about that option, maybe simply as a means of maintaining your sanity as a theatre critic. But it's something that seems to be starting with *Seasons of Discontent*, with those pieces that are collected in that book. You were very, very conscious, oftentimes, to use the theatre as a barometer of larger cultural problems, paradoxes, and shortcomings.

Brustein: Thank you for bringing that up. I did try to do that. It was very boring to be continually banging your head against what you thought to be the really deleterious and second-rate mediocrity of the Broadway stage. You gained nothing. You're probably losing readers, because after all, after a while, it really gets to be boring to read such a thing. So if I wasn't able to put it into a context and try to see how this play fit into our particular time, our particular society, our particular culture, our particular political life, and how it reflected on that—I don't think anyone can write a word without somehow creating that kind of reflection. You just have to find it. Then I began to get happier about my criticism. More and more, I found myself subordinating the judgment that was so necessary to criticism. You know, we're all looking for that judgment: does he like it, doesn't he like it, does she like it, doesn't she like it? I found that to be, when I read criticism, the least interesting part of the criticism. I began to call that Himalayan criticism after Danny Kaye. When he was asked whether he liked the Himalayas, he said, "Loved him, hated her." It's essentially what we've all been practicing: Himalayan criticism.

Especially when I began practicing as a director—as an artistic director, as an actor, as a playwright—I knew that that kind of criticism did me no good whatsoever when it was leveled at me from somewhere else. I was trying, really, to find what it was that was helpful and useful, without in any way deferring or cheating or cheapening or lying. I wanted to see what it was that could possibly help a theatre artist to advance. So I thought my most important function as a critic was to try to find out what these artists, if they were artists, were trying to do, and then to see whether they did that successfully—at least to try and find out what the intention was before I rejected it.

Copeland: Stanley?

Kauffmann: Context. You touched a poignant note when you talked about *The Playwright as Thinker* and your animus against the middlebrow theatre. If only we had that middlebrow theatre back now! Where is a Theatre Guild? Where are Maxwell Anderson and Philip Barry when we

need them? We have no consolidated enemy now. We have no consolidated cultural being on Broadway now. I don't go to the theatre much anymore, but I read. I'm not talking about musicals—I don't know anything about them or what's happening—and I don't think you're talking about musicals, although you wrote an excellent piece on *My Fair Lady*. You said about *My Fair Lady*—this is interpolation—that Bernard Shaw went back to the legend to make this play, a brilliant comedy, and the makers of *My Fair Lady* took it back to the legend.

As far as I can make out from reading about the Broadway theatre today, there is no firmly entrenched middle-class play that's going on. There is no sense that the middlebrow as such is a power in the theatre. The theatre seems to me—I'm going to leave musicals out because it's a whole other area—once in a while to squeeze in an attempt at a play production on Broadway. When I say I wish all those dull people were back—nice dull people—it is that I'm so adrift, so bewildered, so lost in the current cultural situation. When we talk about reforming this or that in the theatre, or anything else, I don't know what we're reforming it toward. In this century, in the decades—it seems like centuries—that I've been through, there was, for most of those decades, always a structure which I could like and loathe. At least I believe there was. I have no sense of that now. I have only a sense of continual flow and whirl and change and rampant hedonism. That seems to me to apply to Broadway theatre, too. If you were going to write *The Playwright as Thinker* today, I don't think you would, because there isn't—

Bentley: Well, I might if I was in London, and I would attack David Hare as the Maxwell Anderson.

Kauffmann: There's no David Hare in this country. David Mamet is not David Hare.

Bentley: No, I wouldn't attack David Mamet.

Kauffmann: What I'm saying is, we have no David Hare in this country. We have Mamet and we have—

Bentley: Mamet's written a book against Hollywood that is the same thing as—

Brustein: We have Adam Rapp, we have Paula Vogel—we have about 35 really fine playwrights.

Copeland: Sam Shepherd.

Brustein: Sam Shepherd.

Kauffmann: Whatever you think of them, they're not middlebrows by any means. Wallace Shawn, certainly not a middlebrow. But those aren't controlling forces in our theatre. They don't dictate to the Shuberts the way the Playwrights Company used to. You remember that producing organization?

Bentley: Yes.

Kauffmann: My concern with the topic of this panel today is, where is the theatre going to come from, what's it going to be, for people who have ambitions towards theatre criticism today? In drama criticism, they can always say, "Well, here's another book on some giant of the past." But what would Joe or Jane Blow do, think, yearn for, ache for in the future? For me that's one of the distinguishing marks of criticism—of good criticism. Anyone can write a theatre review. Any literate, intelligent person can tell you on paper what he or she thought of a play.

Copeland: As opposed to poetry or dance?

Kauffmann: Yes, exactly, because it's the same currency. What distinguishes the good, valuable theatre critic, in my view, is that in that review, or certainly in the current of his reviews, you sense that he's writing about a cause—about a theatre in his or her mind. The criticism he is writing is possibly in some ways cloaked, but is a crusade. Bernard Shaw said—if I may tell you things that Bernard Shaw said—that he'd been crusading in his criticism, for years and years, for a new drama. Then he found out there wasn't any, and he had to write it. But he was crusading. You wrote *The Playwright as Thinker* because of a theatre in your heart, in your head, that you wanted to see come into being. The same is certainly true for you, and you made theatres to help fulfill it. You did the Bernard Shaw thing: You tried to make the theatre to fulfill the one you were aching for in your criticism. It's not my boast, but my defect—I can't imagine easily the theatre that would underlie the new critics.

Brustein: I have an idea that just occurred to me, which is that Eric, Stanley, and perhaps myself, were too successful in establishing the importance of *The Playwright as Thinker* or a thinking playwright or a truly artistic one, and we created places for them which are no longer being supported. Therefore they are no longer being supported. It's not that there are no playwrights in this country. I think there are more playwrights in this country of high quality than ever before in my memory. They just don't have a place to have their plays produced. Broadway has just turned away from them altogether, and the little theatres, as you call them—even the resident theatre movement—are no longer being supported either by the National Endowment for the Arts or by the Ford Foundation or the Rockefeller Foundation or any foundation, except for Mellon and Shubert and Jujamcyn. A few foundations are supporting these theatres, but not enough to keep them going. Therefore, they have begun to turn themselves into commercial producing organisms, and they're putting on things that have been successful elsewhere and not taking the chances on the new. As a result, we have succeeded ourselves out of existence, I think.

Copeland: Isn't that also an incredibly impoverishing pressure on a young playwright who wants to see his or her work produced, when he or she is told, "Look, two or three characters max, one set." I mean, what kind of constricting effect does that have on the dramatic imagination of somebody who wants to think epically, who wants to think about class.

Brustein: And if that playwright does produce that play, he or she is told, "We'll give you a reading, we'll give you a workshop, we'll give you another reading, we'll give you another workshop." They never get productions. Richard Nelson wrote a very inflammatory speech about this recently, in which he complained that the playwright is always being helped to write

his play by dramaturges, by artistic directors, but he or she is never allowed to put the play on. And that is a problem.

Bentley: Returning to what Stanley was saying about the situation, young people—some of you are very young here—who might be thinking about becoming drama critics, I think the advice is, “Don’t.” But if you’re interested in theatre, which I assume is the underlying thought, do something else, not drama criticism. It’s something not to do for various reasons, and Stanley gave some of them right now. If you think you could do that, then ten to one you could do something else in the theatre in one branch or another. Like my two colleagues here, I think the important branch is the playwright. I think the center is the playwright for dramatic theatre. That’s not true for ballet, obviously, and circus, but it’s true for the dramatic theatre. So you should just try to become a playwright. I agree with what Bob said: there are plenty of playwrights—even quite good playwrights—more than in the past as we’ve known it in New York in the sixty years I’ve been here, undoubtedly. That’s why I wouldn’t attack the relatively established figures now, like Mamet, because he’s not the enemy. He’s not part of the system as the enemy. He has to work with the system but he hates it and wrote a book against it. So he doesn’t need me to write a book against him. I don’t know that the situation is really worse than in the ‘30s, though. I agree with what you said in the beginning, Stanley—the theatre is always in an impossible state.

Kauffmann: But in the ‘30s, the theatre was, as usual, in a low state, but it was a recognizable low state. It was middlebrow at its best. It was Marxist, and so on and so forth. There was a landscape that you could perceive. Speaking just for myself, I cannot perceive that now. You once advised in your forward to *The Playwright as Thinker* that critics should be abolished.

Bentley: Yes.

Kauffmann: That makes me nervous, not quite for a personal reason, because I don’t have that much longer to contradict it. But something has happened in the three centuries since theatre criticism began in the English language. Stealthily, almost, a new literary genre grew. There is great writing in the history of theatre criticism. It is a literature—a corollary art. If one wants to take that tack, it is possible—as part of the worry about the future of the theatre—to worry that that the literary genre is imperiled. I mean, who would want to be cheated of the critics just in reading? You said yourself just now, when you were talking about your own criticism, that you were interested in more than the Himalayas. What you were interested in is enrichment, and that vehicle of enrichment, that vessel and opportunity for it exists in theatre criticism.

Copeland: If you make a list of the intellectuals who were interested in writing about the theatre a generation ago—Wilfred Sheed, Susan Sontag, Elizabeth Hardwick, Richard Gilman, of course, who we just lost—that’s something different today, isn’t it? We don’t have people of that caliber who even go to the theatre, let alone write about it.

Bentley: Well, we never had theatre of that caliber. I don’t think the situation is any worse than in the past, and in some ways it’s better, as Robert is saying. There are truly plenty of good writers around, and the arrival of women writers as a new force is interesting, culturally, and positive.

Brustein: What's different, Eric, is the audience. We haven't discussed the audience.

Kauffmann: That's what I mean, that's what I mean.

Brustein: When you go to the theatre on Broadway, for example, or even off Broadway, do you recognize the audience anymore?

Kauffmann: No.

Brustein: I used to recognize my aunt in her mink coat going to the matinee, you know? There was an audience there that was regular, passionate. Whether their taste was any good or not, they went to the theatre. I don't see that audience anymore. It's mostly tourists and expense account people. As a result, look at the audience, say, for *The New Republic*. We've been mentioning *The New Republic*. We all wrote or write for it. That was the place where, you know, theatre criticism had a very noble history, starting with Stark Young and then yourself and Stanley, who wrote theatre criticism for it. The fact is, *The New Republic* has virtually done away with its theatre criticism for political reasons.

Kauffmann: And *Time* and *Newsweek* have also.

Brustein: *Time* and *Newsweek* have also. But I think at *The New Republic*, it's been political reasons, because the readership has kind of moved to the right, and it's not a theatre-going readership. It's not neo-con, but it's more politically organized than it is culturally organized. That's a serious change.

Bentley: There, sitting next to you, is a first-class theatre critic who lost his job because the paper he was writing for ceased to be interested in the theatre. They didn't fire him; they fired the theatre.

Brustein: But he started his own—

Bentley: He started his own site, which you and I have appeared in.

Brustein: Terrific.

Audience: Who is he?

Brustein: Jonathan Kalb. And what's the name of your website again?

Kalb: HotReview.

Brustein: HotReview.org.

Kauffmann: In the late 1920s, early 1930s, my parents, who were just middle class people—I liked them, but they were just middle class—well, I liked one of them—went to the theatre every

few weeks. After they went to the theatre, whatever it was, all week long after that, at dinner and elsewhere, my father would say, “She should have shot him before.” And my mother would say, “No, she was right to shoot him.” That’s the corollary to what you were saying: there was an audience. The level aside, it was a recognizable audience. That’s part, I think, of what I’m complaining about. I don’t recognize the world anymore. Maybe that’s because I’m an antique. Very possibly.

Copeland: The weird thing is, even downtown I don’t recognize the audience. There’s the Public Theatre. Whether it’s P.S. 122 or the Public, there isn’t a sense that it’s a community that really, really believes in a set of values that are being nurtured by that institution.

Kauffmann: You mentioned a name, now, that’s one key, I think, to what we’ve all said—the Public Theatre. We all had our troubles with Joe Papp, as critic and otherwise. But 25 years ago Papp ran the Public Theatre—it was a vital force in New York. Dynamic. It at least sometimes gave you something to be furious about, and sometimes things to be wild about. But Papp made that theatre because he had a clear view of the culture he was in, and was making his theatre for. Whether you agreed with it or not, in his head it was crystal clear, and that’s what produced that theatre. That’s what I feel the loss of now.

Bentley: Well, you see, Stanley, one aspect is that Papp was a former communist and leftist and Marxist, and he believed, as I do, in state theatre. That’s also Monarchist, going back to France in the 17th century—and not in the capitalistic theatre, the theatre business. No business like show business, except show business is exactly like every other business. It is part of that.

Brustein: But Papp got into the theatre business with *A Chorus Line* and with *Pirates of Penzance* and everything. He used them to finance his work at the New York Public. The question was, at what point was he more interested in the financing than he was in what he was financing. There was always a delicate balance.

Kauffmann: He began for legitimate reasons. He began.

Brustein: Absolutely. The most legitimate reasons. He’s a hero of our culture, Joe Papp.

Copeland: Yes. No matter how middlebrow Papp’s own taste was, he was constantly able to transcend that and support experimental artists like Richard Foreman and Lee Brewer. And we don’t have anybody with that catholicity of vision today.

Brustein: Oskar Eustis is doing that now. Oskar Eustis is playing host right now to the Worcester Group, to the Labyrinth Theatre.

Copeland: That’s true.

Bentley: He was an old fashioned socialist. His belief is that Shakespeare in the Park should be free. It’s not necessarily a reasonable thing, because the kind of public he got—they paid \$10 to see a movie, they could pay \$10 to see Shakespeare. But it was important that Papp thought that way, as against Moses, who represented the capitalistic system against him.

Copeland: Absolutely, and he was a relic.

Kauffmann: It was his idea to make the theatre a part of the world you lived in. How many people do you know who are not themselves working in or specifically interested in theater, but who go to plays? How long is it since you went to a dinner party where you met intelligent, literate human beings who talked about a play?

Brustein: On the other hand, remember the days when Lionel Trilling would tell us that, you know, the theatre was not a legitimate form of literature.

Copeland: He said the same thing about film.

Brustein: Exactly. A lot of intellectuals thought it was beneath the salt. Eric was one of the few intellectuals in those days who was passionate about the theatre, and he brought a lot of intellectuals along with him. But you were the first, really, to take the theatre seriously in that age.

Copeland: There's so much talent in the audience—you know, I see Rocco Landesma, I see Jonathan Kalb, I see all these people who are probably going to have interesting questions.

Kauffmann: That was true, you know, in the left wing journalism of that period—talking about the 1940s, now. Mary McCarthy, for instance, tried occasionally. But she was so un-theatrical a person. One of her judgments was that *The Importance of Being Earnest* is not funny.

Brustein: And *A Streetcar Named Desire* was a mother in-law play.

Copeland: And *King Lear* is about ungrateful children.

Brustein: That's the Yiddish version.

Copeland: That's right

Brustein: They never come to see me.

Kauffmann: Orson Welles said once that anyone who talks about films and doesn't mention money is a jackass. We can say, I think, that anybody who talks about the theatre and doesn't mention money is equally jackassian.

Brustein: It's true.

Kauffmann: You were talking about the \$100 ticket thing, and you were talking about the change in the audience. Who can afford it? My parents couldn't have gone to the theatre if it were the equivalent in their day of what it costs today. You're also talking about these playwrights who live from reading to workshop to reading to workshop. It costs money. To do an off-Broadway play costs someone substantial money. When people tell me, as they often do,

about really dreadful things they've seen off-Broadway in some attic somewhere, it costs \$30 to see it. Why did anyone think this is worth \$30? So when you get to the \$3 million productions on Broadway, who can possibly pay back that \$3 million that the show costs? The tourists.

Copeland: I'd love to hear if Rocco has a couple cents he wants to put in, or a couple million.

Brustein: A former critic, mind you.

Copeland: Rocco, you know what I found on my bookshelf? Remember that issue of *Yale Theatre* that you edited, devoted to American theatre criticism, and these three guys were writing for it then?

Bentley: What you're saying, Stanley, is the economic interpretation of history is just as applicable to the theatre as to everything else, and in fact slightly more so. The dollar—follow the dollar and you'll get the answer.

Copeland: Jonathan, I don't want to put you on the spot, but if there's something you'd really like to say, I think we'd probably like to hear it. This is Jonathan Kalb, everyone, who is really one of the few legatees still writing today. I would say Jonathan and Michael Feingold, who—

Kauffmann: Another boss of mine—someone else who gave me a job.

Kalb: Well, thank you for inviting me to speak. I did not come prepared to speak, so let me see what I can pull out of my brain here. I recognize everything that's been said by these three heroes of mine as true. However, I can't see it the same way, because I'm about half the age of my beloved former teacher Stanley Kauffmann, here. I am discouraged and dismayed by the situation you describe, but I can't say I'm confused by it. I think that maybe that's because I grew up with some of the changes that everyone has mentioned.

You know, I think that what needs to be said is that the disappearance of space that's available to serious criticism is a big issue here. It's not just Bob and *The New Republic*. Downstairs is John Halpern, who has just recently told me about the cuts to his column in *The Observer*. We could list on and on the disappearances that have happened apart from my column in the *New York Press*. One does what one can with a changing world, and it's absolutely senseless to simply complain about it, and shoot arrows and missiles at this changing world.

I think our job is to look at the disappearance of critical culture and find ways and places to continue it. Part of what's happening today, in my view, is that there's no social capital to be had in either knowing about the current theatre the way there was a generation ago, or writing about the current theatre, as there was a generation ago. The editors who are cutting these theatre columns are right, from their point of view, because they're looking at a world in which theatre doesn't matter to their readership. For us who love the theatre to say, "Oh, you Philistines," is terrible. It's like getting mad at the Bushies for having elected a professional Philistine. They elected him! They got 50 million people to vote for him. That's the country we live in. What are we going to do about it?

And what are we going to do about this problem of the disappearance of critical culture? You have to find ways to be sneaky, to be clever, and to find little avenues to continue it. I think that the world is kind of mixing up right now, and trying to figure out what the place for judgment and discrimination is in this new mediated, wired, info-age world. We all, I think, have spent time being depressed about this “everyone’s a critic” ethos on the Internet. And everyone *is* a critic. But on the other hand, there’s a couple of really good bloggers out there. So why take aim at all blogging?

Someone said to me the other day, “Hey, I saw the HotReview. What an idea—an edited blog!” And I thought, “Wow, is that what I’m doing? I thought it was called a journal.” You know, an edited blog used to be called a journal, where you’re interested in the quality of the writing and you edit the writing carefully. That used to be called, you know, a journal. So maybe there are places for us to meet in the future, when all of this equalization sends up all of its dust. Everybody gets a chance to express the fact that they’re a critic, and then becomes hungry again for the views of people who know a little bit more about the subject. So I don’t know. Yes, I’m dismayed, I’m discouraged, but I also am in my 40s and have to look, hopefully, to a long life of figuring out what to do about this and I’m not giving up, regardless of what Eric says.

Copeland: Rocco Landesman. People downstairs, the producer of *The Producers* is about to talk.

Landesman: I’m not going to defend myself against Stanley’s charges, at least not this early in the program. I thought a lot of what he said was absolute nonsense, given the quality and variety of the playwrights that are working and being regularly produced on Broadway at this moment. But that’s not what I’m going to take up here. Later, maybe.

One of the things that occurred to me while I was listening to this discussion is that when I was in Bob Brustein’s program at Yale—it was a program to train critics, because Bob felt that critics needed some training, and that publications shouldn’t just move someone over from restaurant criticism to theatre criticism. Maybe he can address later whether he thinks that program was successful or not. There are not too many of his trained critics out working at the moment, for various reasons. But when I came through that program, it was very clear—one of the things we were studying was this thing that we referred to as “adversarial criticism.” It was based on the notion that there was a culture and there was a counter-culture. It seems to me that now we talk about the lack of the adversarial critics, but we don’t mention that there seems to no longer really be a culture and a counter-culture. It’s much more confusing. Roger, as I’m sure you know, it’s much more of an amorphous kind of situation. One of the things that happened—it began to happen when Stanley was appointed to be drama critic at *The New York Times*—is that the mainstream media is a lot different than it was in those days when you had a culture and a counter-culture. If you look at the people writing in many of the mainstream publications in recent years—Frank Rich, obviously, in *The New York Times*; Ben Brantley and Charles Isherwood at *The New York Times*; Jeremy McCarter, who’s here now, at *New York Magazine*; and his predecessor, John Simon—there’s a much more sophisticated and educated critic in the mainstream media.

So I wonder whether there's the same need for the counter-cultural critics or the adversarial critics that there was in those days. Many of them, frankly, have moved over to the mainstream media.

Brustein: Well, I yield to no one in my admiration for Frank Rich's op-ed page in the *New York Times*, which is the one consistent onslaught that we've got against this incredible, appalling president that we have to deal with every day. Thank heaven for Frank Rich in that regard. But as a critic, he was a triumphant, witty, powerful middlebrow, and he prevented a lot of very important playwrights and directors from being produced in New York. I date the downfall and deterioration of the American theatre from Frank Rich's quite brilliant regime, because he wanted those people on stage that he approved of, and he didn't want them if he didn't approve of them.

Audience: Like any critic.

Brustein: Well, I don't think it's the critic's position. Certainly it's not the position of one newspaper to be determining—

Audience: What about August Wilson?

Brustein: I wasn't suggesting that August Wilson not appear on the American stage. I was a minor, small voice saying that I thought he was essentially a middlebrow writer, regardless of the fact that he was black. He was writing what I thought to be bad Arthur Miller plays, under the influence of a director that he finally was able to throw off and get back to his poetic roots. He was a poet who was not being allowed to perform like a poet. I was doing the same thing that Hilton Als has now done in the *New Yorker*—and he's a black critic—which is to point out that this is an overrated writer. But I didn't want him banished from the New York stage, and I wasn't, thank God, in the position to banish him from the New York stage. That, by the way, is why I turned down the offer of a job at *The New York Times* in 1965. I did not want to be in the position of preventing people from being employed because I had an opinion. But that is what happened with Frank Rich, and I think we can really trace the history of a kind of deterioration in the quality of the American theatre and the aspiration and ambitions of American theatre to that regime. And Ben Brantley is very much in his footsteps.

Kauffmann: By the way, after Bob turned down that job at the *Times*, the *Times* people were talking to me, and they told me that when Bob was offered the job, he said, "It ought to be abolished."

Brustein: And I recommended Stanley, who has never forgiven me for it.

Kauffmann: One word to what you said, Rocco. It isn't necessary that all the critics—let's call them mainstream, big media critics—be bad, or stupid. Certainly I think we have one with us tonight who we're glad is writing criticism. That's not a necessity. What's needed is other critics who have more space, more time, more room for contextual criticism. In other words, more re-readable criticism.

Landesman: Yes, I agree. The only thing is that it seems to me there was a noticeable change in the quality of criticism in the mainstream press. We don't have to mention the names. They write for the *Daily News*, the *New York Post* and *The New York Times*. There was a sea change, from my perspective, in the quality of criticism in the mainstream press.

Kauffmann: It's inarguable that the literacy and the education of current media critics is far above what it used to be.

Bentley: I don't think we see it that way. I don't at all. I don't think any of them are better than Brooks Atkinson, for instance.

Audience: This is a question for Mr. Bentley and others. It's noticeable that you mentioned Brecht and Shaw, who were Marxist to a certain degree—certainly Brecht was, and Shaw wanted to change the world, too. Do you feel that, possibly, the—temporary, maybe—loss by Marxism has caused the validity and the quality of criticism to go down so much? People you've mentioned were all people who had socialist leanings and had a class outlook, whereas now the class outlook is masked as if it doesn't exist, and this has affected the critics who, for the most part, are not too knowledgeable about class situations, and don't protest except in a very liberal type of way, which makes it inferior.

Bentley: I don't know how to respond to that, but I was thinking during the discussion—Rocco, I couldn't see it your way, that there's been an improvement or a greater sophistication. I think not at all. If you take *Time* and *Newsweek*, who now have nothing, they had very sophisticated critics like Louis Kronenberger, for instance.

Brustein: Jack Kroll.

Bentley: And Ted Kalem. That's the weeklies. So we talk about *New York Magazine*—John Simon was the most highbrow of the highbrows, on principal. Nothing has gotten more sophisticated, but where it was pretty low under Frank Rich, it's even lower now. When you find that the critic of *The New York Times* thinks that *My Fair Lady* is an improvement on *Pygmalion*, there is someone that doesn't know drama, that doesn't know the theatre, that doesn't know art.

Kauffmann: Well, there's no use animadverting against the current critics of big publications. Our real concern here, I think, is what's the future? Is there a future for those who will never be critics of mass circulation journals? What's the future for the intellectual critic? They have to be, by the rules of the game, at a lower level than the best minds available. *The Times* doesn't want the best minds on it. I had a predecessor, Stark Young, who was hired away from *The New Republic* to *The Times* and lasted one year. I didn't even equal that. At their dinner parties, they talk about having good critics, but they get nervous when they're around.

Bentley: What did you mean by "lasted one year?" That's a statement of fact, but he wasn't fired.

Kauffmann: He wasn't fired?

Bentley: No. No, from what I understood.

Kauffmann: I don't know the facts. Did he resign?

Bentley: It's very interesting in relation to what we're all talking about. This is in 1923, and Stark Young was a young instructor at Amherst College who came to New York and was ambitious to go into the theatre. He was a playwright and ambitious to be chiefly that. He turned out to be a successful novelist. But he got a job from *The New Republic*, which then could pay real salaries, not like what we got. I got \$100 to \$200 a month from them.

Brustein: Oh, I'm going to tell them that.

Bentley: He found that he didn't feel welcome at *The Times*, and he was given to understand that he didn't represent *The Times*' readership. He had special taste. That meant, partly, that he was gay, which he was. But it meant that he was rather an aesthete and an exquisite, which he also was. He would find exquisite things in actors, and actresses even more, that the other critics hadn't found, that was real insight. It made his writing unique that he would find the spiritual quality in an actress's work. And he'd be able to describe it. But he found that *The Times* wanted somebody who spoke for their audience, and of course they got someone, and that was Brooks Atkinson, who's the most important, historically speaking, theatre critic of the 20th century. Under his reign, things changed in the whole system. But it had never been the case before, and it still isn't the case in other countries, like England, that the critics have such decisive influence. It was this one man at this one time—Brooks Atkinson—who, in the '20s and '30s, and into the '40s, I believe—

Brustein: Oh, longer.

Bentley: —established, not through his own power-madness or anything, but from the relation he had with the public, that he could make a success. Like he'd decide to say about a new Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller, "Tonight, the theatre became an art again." That's line one. Then he tells the plot. Then at the end he said, "The theatre is an art again." At ten o'clock the morning following, there's a line outside the theatre. The play is a hit. No other critic has ever achieved that.

Why was it? Not because of anything arrogant or brutal—he was a very mild-mannered gentleman, Brooks Atkinson. As he said about himself, "I tried to be on the level." He was on the level, but the public agreed with him. If he said, "I like a play," or, "I regard this play as art," they knew they were going to regard it as art and like it. That was what Stark Young felt he didn't have, because no one had had it to the extent that Brooks did.

Copeland: Well, if I understand what you're saying, then it didn't really matter, at that point in time, that Atkinson was writing for *The Times*. I mean, the power was with the man and not the publication.

Bentley: One more point: it wasn't the matter of speaking for *The New York Times*. He was much more liberal, for instance, in politics. He was an ardent New Dealer, and *The Times* was editorially conservative in those days. So it wasn't that kind of politics. It was somehow the kind of person he was—well educated, dry, not too intellectual, very much on the level, extremely liberal, a big supporter of Roosevelt and the New Deal, the federal theatre, and so on. That was where the then-Broadway public was. They were all Brooks Atkinson's children.

Brustein: I don't mean to disagree with you, but—

Bentley: That was very unfortunate for the history of theatre, but it wasn't his fault, it was the fault of us, the public, that this became a factor. It still isn't true in England. It's never happened yet.

Brustein: Eric, he was *primus inter pares*, but you could not have a hit on Broadway without having the seven newspapers. There were seven newspapers and they all had to agree in order for there to be a hit. He was the most important, but it wasn't like later, when all the other newspapers disintegrated and disappeared.

Bentley: Oh, no, no.

Brustein: And to answer your question, Rocco, you were asking about this criticism program that we started at Yale. When I first went to Yale in '66, we felt there was an absence, which was trained critics, intelligent critics, people who knew the field of dramatic literature and beyond the field of dramatic literature—knew the field of politics and the world and what have you, and had a context. We started this program, and Stanley came in to teach in it, and Richard Gilman came in to teach in it. It had a wonderful faculty. And we learned after a period of time—and Roger was in it, Rocco was in it, and Frank Levy, who went to the *Village Voice*. We had, absolutely, very distinguished people in it, but they couldn't find jobs, most of them. Frank found a job for *The Voice* for a while. Barbara Mackey went to *The Saturday Review* and then she went to the Midwest.

Copeland: To Denver.

Brustein: Michael Feingold was probably the most successful in that regard. But ultimately we found we could not place these people; they were too intelligent for the readerships. That was the mistake. So we turned it into a dramaturgy program. I know you hate dramaturgy—we had internal critics instead of external critics. But we were able to place dramaturges, and they functioned very well.

Rogoff: I have to say we're still there.

Brustein: Oh, Gordon! Gordon was, of course, Associate Dean, and also taught in the criticism program. Gordon Rogoff.

Copeland: Oh, wow.

Rogoff: Still, as Jonathan knows, doing the criticism.

Brustein: You're still teaching criticism? Gordon Rogoff is a brilliant critic in his own right, also of *The Village Voice* and any number of other places.

Rogoff: Some of you might remember me from writing for *The Village Voice* over about a 15-year period. One of the students—not that recent, but from the '90s—Charlie McNulty is now the drama critic of *The Los Angeles Times*. He also graduated, if you can call it that, from *The Village Voice* to *The Los Angeles Times*. And there are others from the program who are actually getting jobs, or at least trying to.

Brustein: Good, glad to hear that.

Kauffmann: I'm glad you mentioned the name of Michael Feingold because, for me, he is one of the most admirable theatre critics writing today. He's been 35 years on the level, like Brooks Atkinson, but a very different level, and always conveying a sense of admiration for, respect for, his profession.

Copeland: I should add that Michael Feingold sent me an email late last night apologizing for not being able to be here, and telling me to give his best to his three fathers.

Audience: What I hear, really, is a great sense of yearning from each of you—a sense of yearning which really, seemingly, started out at the beginning of your careers. What you're yearning for is that both criticism and the theatre be done at a higher level, a higher intellectual level. It seemed to be something that you've been struggling for throughout these years. But my question is—and it really goes back to the point made about the audience and the context in which all of this takes place—is there something in American values, in the American system, the American cultural context, which is so heavily based in capitalism, which really begins to put the kind of approach you would like to see taken at an inevitable distance? I mean, going back to what Eric Bentley was saying about a state theatre and the impact of capitalism, do you believe these American values affect even the more intelligent among us in a certain way in terms of our values and outlook, so that inevitably you don't find the kind of bent of mind that would lead to the opening up that you're really looking for?

Copeland: Or just a not-for-profit space, a space that's immune to the demands for capital. That's what we're losing.

Kauffmann: In the notes at the end of *The Playwright as Thinker*, there is a list of books that I think Francisque Sarcey had about the fate of the theatre. He had pamphlets for every decade of his life, mourning the end of the theatre, and the impossibility of its ever getting any better. I could argue with your views of things, but I think that's just the current trouble with the theatre. There's always been a trouble, or troubles, with the theatre. What you said to me seems to be true, but it's not that the theatre has suddenly reached a point of trouble.

Brustein: There's something missing, which is an alternative social and political theory. With the death of Marxism, with the death of the Soviet Union—and, thank heaven, they died—we

don't have that alternative theory against which to push our version of capitalism. As a result, we're involved in a kind of galloping greed, a galloping kind of cumulative situation that I've never experienced in my life before. You can see with all the corruption in Iraq and the corruption here and the corruption in the current government—this is all, I think, a result of there being nothing pushing back against it.

Copeland: What John Kenneth Galbraith called “countervailing forces.”

Brustein: Thank you.

Copeland: We don't have them anymore.

Brustein: And that, certainly, is affecting the theatre.

Audience: I'm the senior editor of *American Theatre Magazine*. I am a trained critic. I brought my O'Neill Playwrights Conference cap from when I was there. Mr. Bentley is a friend of mine from a long time. When I first met Mr. Bentley, I came up to him because of the books. But when I met him, he was really a playwright. The person that I met was a playwright. There was this life as a critic—almost a parallel life. He was a very multidimensional personality for me. Since I work at *American Theatre Magazine*, I go to conferences that TCG does, in which I meet playwrights. And having been to the O'Neill, I've encountered new play developments for playwrights. It seems to me that to be a young person and to be a writer is really rather a more important commodity at the moment, for anybody who is intelligent and smart and has a view in the world. On the other hand, the heroes who I've met are people who have practiced criticism and then moved on to play writing. When I got attracted to criticism, it was because of this idea that, as a critic, like Pauline Kael, you could be an artist. Is it better for a young critic now, is it a more hopeful alternative, to pursue playwriting? Why waste your time doing criticism when you can be a playwright at the moment?

Playwriting is a very healthy and wonderful place at the moment. There is a non-profit system that supports them despite the dysfunctionality of the system, with development hell and lack of producing. The other day I got an email from an organization that says, “Oh, let's invite critics to be playwrights.” I'm just trying to understand the legacy of this. My understanding is that they have moved on to playwriting—adapting plays, translating—versus spending your life as a critic and, you know, being a kind of pure soul.

Kauffmann: I think it is possible to say flatly that there is no critic in the history of criticism, no first-rate critic, who would not rather have been a first-rate artist. It's ridiculous. I remember Kenneth Tynan remarked once, “Oh, I didn't write plays, I wanted to be a critic.” “I don't sing at the Met because I'd rather be a critic.”

Copeland: But you know, I'd rather be Kenneth Tynan than be Maxwell Anderson, to be perfectly honest.

Kauffmann: That's my point. It is better to be a first-class critic if you can be, than a second- or third-rate artist. Excuse me.

Bentley: But a critic is something you are on the side. You are something else before that. Coleridge was a great critic.

Kauffmann: And a great artist.

Bentley: But was mainly a great poet. Sometimes the two are combined.

Brustein: T.S. Eliot.

Copeland: Well, that's sort of a tradition that we've lost, in which most great artists in the 19th century wrote criticism.

Bentley: Doctor Johnson, on the other hand, did more criticism, but he was a fine poet and novelist, too.

Kauffmann: *Vanity of Human Wishes*.

Bentley: I think one shouldn't just cut off these departments in an arbitrary way. One isn't a born critic. One may be a born poet, but a critic is a subsidiary thing. I tended to think this for me. It should be done for a certain time, theatre reviewing. I left off after four years without being fired, and not because I wasn't earning enough money, but because I didn't want to do it anymore. I wanted to put my energies into some other aspect of theatre.

Brustein: A big loss. It was a big loss when you stopped writing theatre criticism. It really was. It was a shock to the community.

Audience: It's been a real privilege for me to be Roger's friend for many years. He's really taught me a lot about theatre. I'm not a theatre person myself, and it's been a privilege to hear you speak today, so I want to thank you for that first of all. My question has to do with value. You've mentioned several times, and I've heard this brought up in several discussions about theatre: the price of tickets, and how it's the tourists that can afford Broadway, and those are the people that are going. But I wanted to just bring your attention to what I see as another element. First of all, Broadway isn't the only theatre in New York. There's off-Broadway, which is not cheap. It's, maybe, say, \$50 or so. That is more affordable. But there are a lot of people who live here who are very bright, who are not what you call the tourists, but they choose to spend their money on other things. These are people that will spend a lot of money on music. They will spend money on very expensive jeans. I'm somebody who grew up in Levi's, and I don't spend \$150 on jeans. A lot of people who used to be considered serious people spend a lot of money on clothes and martinis. They are choosing. They could go to the theatre more. They are valuing other things over the theatre. It's not just the money. I think when you say that, you're getting away from something, which is that people that could go to the theatre have decided not to go. And it's very sad for me. I grew up in New York and my parents were interested in theatre. I realized at a certain point that I stopped going, except with people like Roger, because I have to go alone if I want to go to the theatre, and I don't really want to go alone. I'm 46. I don't really want to go by myself anymore. I have friends who just don't want to do that. They

want to go to films, which are \$15—they're not that cheap—and they want to do other things. They don't want to make the time. Like, you can go to a movie at 2:00, 4:00, 5:00, 7:00, on any day of the week. You have to plan in advance to go be there at that date and time. So I'm really seeing it as a value, and I wanted to get your response to that.

Copeland: Let me see if there's a response from anybody about people simply choosing not to go to the theatre, or choosing to do other things with whatever liquidity they have.

Kauffmann: After I stopped being a regular theatre critic, my wife and I paid to go to a play. Paid! I felt like a sinner doing it. We're sitting there with my knees against the seat in front of me, in this narrow seat, very unlike the film theatres. I said to my wife, "My god, I'm paying more to spend two hours in this space than I paid for a month's rent when we were first married."

Brustein: Which reminds me—it just suddenly occurred to me that there are more new theatres being built today. I don't know what's going to be in them, but a lot of new buildings are going up. The Guthrie's got a new building. There have been two or three new buildings in Boston. There's a new building here—Baryshnikov has put up a theatre.

Kauffmann: Jeffrey Horowitz is trying.

Brustein: Yeah, Jeffrey Horowitz is going to build a new theatre in Brooklyn. There must be some hunger stimulating this.

Copeland: Either that or the edifice complex.

Audience: I do think that theatres are more aware—Broadway and off-Broadway—of what the last speaker said than they're being given credit for. There's a lot of discussion going on now about new business models, new ways of reaching ticket purchasers. Subscriptions are being de-emphasized in favor of these email assaults that I'm sure all of you have gotten. If they've gotten to all of you, you know that they're getting better lists. These discount codes that are being sent to you are a sign that the theatres are very conscious that last-minute buying is much more important than it was before. I think there's more flexibility going on right now in trying to adjust to the new scene than, maybe, people are conscious of.

I spent six years, God help me, as chair of a theatre department, trying to figure out how my students were going to afford to go to the theatre. The opportunities that were sent my way were extraordinary. I think that something very important was learned from John Leguizamo's *Freak*, which was made available for, I think, \$13. The message that came from not just me, but from everybody who runs a theatre program in the city, that at \$15 tops you will fill those seats with young people, has finally, I think, started to get across. I do think that with a moderate investigation, you can find a way to get your students in for either free or very little money. So I just think that there's a little bit more going on behind the scenes to try to address this.

Kauffmann: You call \$15 very little money for a student?

Audience: I think that \$15, at least for our students, was the limit. A movie, now, is \$11.

Audience: This is really more a comment than a question. I was so delighted to hear the three of you speak. Professor Brustein, you left Columbia right when I was going in, so I never got a chance to take a class with you. But I was a Barnard student. I was in lots of productions that Kenneth James, if you remember his name, used to do. We did Shakespeare. I can recite stuff from *Margaret of Anjou*. I'm a doctor now, and that was a long time ago. You have to catch people young, I think. Theatre hunger is there. But if you don't have a taste of it then you don't know what you're hungry for. I think that's tremendously important. We have to get children— young children. I mean, I grew up in the '50s and we had a record player. It was middlebrow stuff, some of it was lowbrow, but I could tell you all the lyrics to every song in *My Fair Lady* and most of the dialog of the parts that weren't music. I was hungry for it. When I was a resident in psychiatry, the first time I really had any money, my favorite way of taking a vacation was to get seven theatre tickets, mostly Broadway. The best thing was to go on Wednesday to a matinee, then have dinner out and go to another show. If the hunger is there, then you've got a potential audience, but there has to be things that people want to see.

Copeland: It has to be a habit.

Brustein: We haven't talked, either, about the cutting off of funds for arts in the schools.

Audience: We don't talk about theatre at dinner parties anymore. I wish we did.

Brustein: For that reason the kids are not being exposed to it.

Audience: People don't go.

Brustein: The first thing they do is they fire the music teacher when they're out of funds. When I was a kid, when I was eight, my parents took me to see something called *Swinging the Dream*. It was a black version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and it had Bojangles Bill Robinson as Oberon. It had Louis Armstrong as Bottom. They had the most incredible cast. Benny Goodman was one of the pit orchestras. I sat there absolutely entranced. The next morning it was reviewed and the critics panned it. I learned three things: number one, never trust the daily critics; number two, there's nice things to be done with the classics other than just putting them on straight; and number three, there's a relationship between music and the arts, and the art of drama. So I knew that as an eight-year-old because I was exposed to it. I never would have known it if I hadn't been taken to the theatre.

Audience: Just another thing about young children: my daughter, who is now twenty, started at the age of seven in the Lucy Moses Music Theatre Workshop, which does mostly musical stuff. They write their own plays, appropriate for each age group, and their own songs. It's a wonderful organization. But the perk is that each group gets a chance to go to a Broadway show for free. The organization takes them. Again, I know this was not the kind of level of theatre that you were talking about, but I think it's a way of exciting children, you know? The big perk: "I got to go to a Broadway show and I'm seven years old."

Copeland: Absolutely. I don't want to put you on the spot, but I think this might be the last question so it better be good.

Rosen: Back to Mr. Kauffmann's point about something missing: I think what's missing is what McCarthyism took out of American intellectual life.

Copeland: There is a good, strong argument.

Rosen: And it's also an explanation for the decline of criticism, I think. Please comment.

Kauffmann: Well, to your point, there's no vital alternative now to this snake swallowing its own tail of sheer greed. It's part of what McCarthy helped to destroy.

Audience: In other words, since Marxism is dead, as you said—

Kauffmann: Well, Marxism is not dead.

Audience: Well, he said it. I disagree. Therefore, the theatre is dying.