Michelle MacArthur

The Feminist Spectator as Blogger: Creating Critical Dialogue about Feminist Theatre on the Web[1]

From blogging, to YouTube-ing, to social networking, feminist theatre audiences and artists are increasingly using the Internet to shift the power dynamics in their relationship to mainstream critics. This is not only reshaping the discourse surrounding theatre, but also working toward the broader cultural change that Jill Dolan envisioned as an outcome of exposing the ideological underpinnings of performance and criticism in her landmark book, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. In this article I consider how alternative critical practices made possible by the web address problems posed by the static, single-authored nature of traditional theatre criticism. Through a survey of feminist theatre reviewing in the blogosphere and a brief case study of Montreal-based performer Pol Pelletier's web activities, I investigate what blogging means for the feminist audiences and artists who practice it, the mainstream critics whose profession it threatens, and the scholars who rely on reviews in their own work as critics and historians. I argue that while blogging provides a means for feminist spectators and artists to address key gender issues present in both theatre and criticism, its potential to transform these institutions is rooted in its negotiation of two key functions: on the one hand, its ability to "preach to the converted" and create community, and on the other, its ability to navigate more mainstream spaces on the web and engage with hegemonic critical discourse.

Que ce soit en bloguant, en partageant des vidéos sur YouTube ou en participant à des réseaux sociaux, le public et les artistes du théâtre féministe se servent de plus en plus d'Internet pour agir sur la dynamique de pouvoir qui existe entre eux et la critique traditionnelle. Ce faisant, non seulement ce groupe arrive-t-il à refaçonner le discours sur le théâtre, mais il contribue à un changement social plus large en exposant les fondements du rapport entre performance et critique, tel que l'entrevoyait Jill Dolan dans son important ouvrage The Feminist Spectator as Critic. *Dans cet article, Michelle MacArthur fait voir comment les pratiques critiques parallèles que propose le Web permettent d'aborder les problèmes que pose la nature statique de la critique théâtrale traditionnelle, signée par une seule personne. Par un survol de la critique du théâtre féministe dans la blogosphère et un bref examen des activités virtuelles de l'artiste Pol Pelletier, basée à Montréal, MacArthur cherche à savoir ce que signifie l'acte de*

bloguer pour les publics et les artistes féministes qui s'y consacrent, de même que pour les critiques traditionnels, qui voient leur profession mise en péril par cette pratique, et les chercheurs qui se servent des critiques de spectacles dans leurs travaux de nature critique ou historique. MacArthur fait valoir que, si le blogage permet au public et à la critique féministe d'aborder les enjeux liés au genre qui sont présents à la fois dans le théâtre et la critique, la potentialité qu'a ce médium de transformer ces institutions prend racine dans son aptitude à négocier deux grandes fonctions : d'une part, il permet de « prêcher aux convertis » et de former une communauté; d'autre part, il permet de naviguer dans des espaces virtuels plus traditionnels et d'entrer en dialogue avec les discours critiques hégémoniques.

On Wednesday, September 20, 2006, theatre critic Maxie Szalwinska took to *The Guardian*'s *Culture Vulture* blog to declare that bloggers are "The new critics." Her article is followed by a handful of respondents, many of whom run their own blogs and/or review theatre for print publications. While all commentators are enthusiastic about the growth of this medium and its potential effect on reviewing, none is as invested as HardHead, who begins his or her post writing, "Dear God, please let this be the case. Anything to be rid of the putrid pack of current critics: more pleased with their own *bons mots* than any analysis of a show. This bunch of white, middle-class, middle aged [sic] spreaders need their power diluted fast."

HardHead's prayer bears traces of arguments made by both artists and scholars when critiquing mainstream reviewing practices; in particular, the prayer resembles feminist efforts to problematize the homogenous identities of reviewers in the popular press (see Burgoyne; Corbeil; Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*; Saddlemyer). While HardHead does not ascribe gender or sexuality to the "spreaders [who] need their power diluted fast," both are central to Jill Dolan's critique in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Groundbreaking when it was first published in 1988, Dolan's book seeks to unseat the ideal white, middle-class, heterosexual male spectator and make room for a feminist one, whose alternative approaches to criticism promise to "unmask the naturalized ideology of the dominant culture most theatre and performance represents" (17) and, in so doing, "to affect a larger cultural change in the ideological and material condition of women and men" (18). With the launch of her blog, *The Feminist Spectator*, seventeen years later in 2005, Dolan

began to carve out a space where she could "preach to the converted through a more in-depth discourse about the interrelationship between the arts, identity, and culture," free from the constraints of the "presumptive 'universals' of the mainstream press" ("Blogging" 492).

From blogging, to YouTube-ing, to social networking, feminist theatre audiences and artists are increasingly using the Internet to shift the power dynamics in their relationship to mainstream critics. This is not only reshaping the discourse surrounding theatre (which has been Dolan's commitment with *The Feminist Spectator* in its print and online incarnations), but also contributing to the broader cultural change that Dolan envisioned. The feminist presence in the theatre blogosphere has received virtually no scholarly attention, yet its pervasiveness and growing impact on criticism and artistic practice point to the need for further study. While this topic can be approached from myriad angles, I begin here with what I see as its primary issues; my goal is to start a conversation that will stimulate further inquiry into the feminist critical discourse circulating on the web.

In this essay I consider how alternative critical practices made possible by the web address problems posed by the static, single-authored nature of traditional theatre criticism and the "presumptive 'universals'" upon which it relies. Through a survey of feminist theatre reviewing in the blogosphere and a brief case study of Montreal-based performer Pol Pelletier's web activities, which I see as a model of online feminist theatre criticism, I will investigate what blogging means for the feminist audiences and artists who practice it, the mainstream critics whom it challenges, and the scholars who rely on reviews in their own work as critics and historians. I argue that while blogging provides a means for feminist spectators and artists to address key gender issues present in both theatre and criticism, its potential to transform these institutions is rooted in its negotiation of two key functions: on the one hand, its ability to "preach to the converted" and create community, and on the other, its ability to navigate more mainstream spaces on the web and engage with hegemonic critical discourse. If feminists are to take advantage of this ever-expanding medium, they must find a balance between these two functions, and carefully tread the shifting centres and margins that constitute the blogosphere. Too much emphasis on community-building at the expense of dialoguing with mainstream voices limits the effect of the counter-discourse developed within the feminist blogosphere; too much focus on infiltrating the mainstream weakens the

feminist community's ability to develop alternative insights and modes of criticism. Put more simply, the power of the "white, middle-class, middle aged spreaders" is not diluted by the mere presence of blogging, but through its strategic use.

Scholarly Approaches to Theatre Blogging

While critics and theatergoers have engaged in online debates about the role of the blogosphere in the processes of theatrical production and reception and its impact on critical practices—appropriately, on blogs like *The Guardian*'s theatre blog—scholars have been slower to take up these issues.[2] The alternative critical practices emerging from blogging and other online activities have so far been under-theorized and under-documented, in both the Canadian and international contexts, for several reasons. The ephemeral and boundless nature of the web poses challenges to scholars aiming to explore its critical territories: how can we rely on a review on a personal blog or a comment in an online newspaper forum when, unprotected by the permanency of print, it can disappear the next day? If a Google search of a particular production yields limitless results, how do we establish parameters for research and sort through the host of voices we uncover? What are we to do with the increased presence of artists writing online about their own work? Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, deeply-entrenched ideas about the distinctions between professional and amateur and what constitutes credible knowledge may lead to a certain reluctance within the academy to legitimize critical voices on the web in the first place.

This last point is stressed by Australian researchers Neal Harvey, Helena Grehan, and Joanne Tompkins, who argue that "bloggers and blog posts now contribute so significantly to Australian theatre practice, production and reception that researchers need to find a methodology to engage with this practice as part of their analysis of live theatre production and reception in Australia" (109-10). Their wide-ranging survey of the theatrical blogosphere is so far unmatched by scholars in other parts of the world. Focusing on Australian theatre blogs, they develop a taxonomy that offers a useful point of departure for theorizing blogging practices.

The rest of the small (but growing) body of research on theatre blogging is concerned with analyzing how the medium might influence our methods of performance analysis and archival practices. For example, Shakespearean scholar Peter Holland documents his process of watching a performance of

Coriolanus at the Globe from the introspective perspective of a blogger in his appropriately-titled 2007 article "'It's all about me. Deal with it.'" While his approach is tongue-in-cheek, his conclusion suggests that scholars writing performance criticism might learn something from their online counterparts. Academic writing, he argues, does not define the complexities of watching, creating a disjunction between the performance under analysis and the activity of engaging with it. Holland concludes:

> That dispiriting night at the Globe last summer taught me at least that I have to deal with the politics of performance not as some cerebral activity of intellectualized response but as a powerfully, almost uncontrollably immediate and imminent anger. Far from being a proper exclusion from academic writing, a part of the self that cannot be admitted, it too must find its place as a part of the self that watches, the self that is moved by the play and with or against the production, in approval or disapproval, with joy or with annoyance, in celebration or despair. This too is me and I have to deal with it. (38)

Holland's consideration of his affective experience of watching allows him to develop an approach to performance analysis that is more comprehensive and transparent. As I will discuss shortly, this privileging of subjectivity over objectivity is also integral to feminist approaches to criticism, in both their print and online forms.

Eleanor Collins, in a special issue of *Shakespeare* on reviewing, argues that the "the open-ended dialogue" (330) facilitated by blogs and other web-based forums provides a more appropriate way to deal with the collaborative, spontaneous, and ever-evolving nature of performance than the "static, often single-authored texts fixed in print" that constitute academic and journalistic reviewing (332). She explains:

> Not only does the blog or 'e-review' lend authority to the experiences of a multitude of people and a variety of different interpretations, it is also a forum that enables practitioners or those directly involved in the production to comment, and facilitates a dialogic model of reviewing that can provide a truer sense of the production, its changing features and varied reception, over a period of time. (334)

Collins posits a model of criticism based on blogging, which, she argues, should and will eclipse traditional print criticism. She suggests that this "live archive" could ideally enrich the work of scholars, as well as directors researching production history and the interested public (334). I will return to the connection between blogging and scholarly work at the end of this essay; in the meantime, I would like to draw attention to Collins's implicit criticisms of mainstream theatre reviewing, particularly her troubling of its authority and relative inaccessibility. These criticisms join a small but significant body of scholarship on reviewing and also reflect feminist concerns with reviewing practices. Similarly, Holland's call for performance analysis that takes embodied and affective experience into account and for more inclusive historiographic practices parallels feminist approaches to criticism.[3] The proliferation of feminist voices in the blogosphere is no surprise then, and supports Collins's and Holland's vision of the blog and its potential to create a more open, dialogic model of criticism. The ideal model, however, is established amongst feminist audiences and artists only when they are able to strike a balance between creating a community outside of the mainstream and engaging with—and challenging—it. Studying the feminist blogosphere facilitates an exploration of how it might be used most effectively to create change inside and outside of the theatre, essentially fulfilling Jill Dolan's vision of feminist spectatorship first articulated nearly three decades ago. More generally, this kind of study provides insight into the directions in which the online critical conversation about theatre might proceed.

Feminist Theatre Blogging

Feminist theatre blogging occurs in three main forms: gender- or feminist-focused articles on theatre blogs or in online newspapers, and conversations in their forum or comments sections; one-off posts about theatre found on feminist blogs or in online magazines; and theatre blogs run by either audiences writing about theatre from a feminist perspective or feminist artists or companies themselves. The diversity of these spaces means that feminist theatre blogging is not limited to "preaching to the converted," meaning "anyone committed to the arts' political meanings" (Dolan "About"). Although Dolan aims to reach such an audience, other forms of feminist theatre blogging infiltrate more mainstream spaces on the web and dialogue with myriad voices and positionalities, including some that could be characterized as anti- or post-feminist.

Indeed, while at first glance the web might seem to be a democratic space, the power dynamics that structure it are complex, with "offline" categories of mainstream and marginal persisting online as well. This means that the blogosphere is not feminist by default nor does it provide a utopian escape from patriarchy. In their study of the gendering of the political blogosphere, Dustin Harp and Mark Tremayne argue that the ability to express oneself by accessing speaking space or "discursive power" online is not enough to upset traditional hegemonic structures. They write:

> Voices need an audience to truly be part of a larger public conversation. A greater audience promises a louder voice and, theoretically, more power. While the Internet may allow more voices to enter into public discourse, current systems of power lend validity and volume to some voices while virtually ignoring others. While the Internet may allow access to a public sphere, an intellectual, patriarchal hegemony exists. (259)

Their findings concerning the "patriarchal hegemony" of the Internet are corroborated by several other studies, including those highlighted by Tracy L.M. Kennedy in her article, "The Personal is Political: Feminist Blogging and Virtual Consciousness-Raising." Because political and economic systems of power translate to the virtual world as well, the blogosphere is, as Kennedy puts it, "a gendered and raced environment" (3). In the political blogosphere at the centre of Harp and Tremayne's 2004-2005 study, this means that only ten percent of the top (most-read) bloggers are women.[4] Using network and feminist theory, Harp and Tremayne speculate different causes for this: for example, network theory might explain the perceived dearth of female political bloggers by showing that many female-run political blogs are not widely-linked in other blogs, particularly highly-ranked or "A-list" ones, resulting in lower rankings and traffic to these sites; feminist theory might account for this dearth by highlighting assumptions about the definition of politics that exclude some of the topics of choice for female bloggers, such as the cost of childcare or healthcare, meaning that blogs focused on these topics are not considered to be a part of the political blogosphere in the first place.

Though to date no comparable study has been conducted on the theatre blogosphere, if it is indeed structured similarly to the political blogosphere—and I would argue that it is—then the need

for feminist bloggers to navigate both mainstream and marginal web spaces is clear. While Harp and Tremayne's guiding assumption that a greater audience equals greater power appears logical, the authors overlook the power to be attained in marginal spaces in the blogosphere, when the discussion is not part of a larger public conversation but caters to the needs and interests of a particular community. Calling feminist blogging "feminist virtual consciousness-raising" (1) and positing a lineage between Second and Third Wave praxis, Kennedy argues, "At a time in feminist history when feminism itself has been called fragmented, disjointed, or even dead, blogging is an important way for feminist thinkers to connect and build community and to advocate for social change" (1). Just as feminist artists can harness the power of their location on the margins to develop innovative performance strategies that challenge dominant paradigms, feminist bloggers can use the community created on the fringes of the web to develop counter-discursive critical perspectives.[5]

I would like to now look at some examples of feminist theatre blogging from the categories I have outlined and discuss how this practice responds to the central criticisms scholars have launched at mainstream reviewing over the last twenty years: its pretense of objectivity, its inaccessibility, and the unequal power dynamic it sets-up between critics and artists. Framing the examples in this way elucidates some of the key traits of feminist theatre blogging and demonstrates how blogging, more generally, is changing the landscape of criticism. Characterized by its self-reflectivity, political positioning, accessibility, and dialogic nature, feminist theatre blogging has the potential to challenge traditional criticism by enabling audiences and artists to assert a new form of agency in the processes of theatrical production and reception.

Self-Consciousness, or, "About Me"

A key problem identified with mainstream reviewing is its lack of transparency or self-consciousness. From the prevalent assumption that "good" art speaks to universal human experience emerges the myth of objectivity: there exists objective criteria by which to evaluate art, and critics can write from an objective position and are therefore immune to the influence of ideology or, indeed, any of the factors that might frame their theatre-going experience, from personal beliefs to the temperature of the auditorium. This was a focus of scholarly interest in criticism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and part of a broader discussion of the implications of New Criticism and liberal humanism. Paul

Leonard, in his 1988 article, "Critical Questioning," describes the power of objectivity as a driving goal and value of both popular and scholarly critical practice in Canada. He writes:

> Because criticism turns its attention outward—toward productions and/or scripts—it often is able to avoid examining itself with the same assiduity that it brings to bear on the objects of its critical attention. In fact, many Canadian theatre critics seem to believe that their work has no theoretical infrastructure; they operate on the assumption that they can assess and interpret the work they see *as it is*—that is, objectively, without themselves being in the sway of any particular ideology. (4)

Leonard concludes his article by advocating a shift to "self-conscious" criticism:

> [T]heater criticism must stop attempting to efface its subjectivity and must acknowledge its arbitrary nature. This does not mean that critical texts which become more introspective can no longer be "about" specific productions; rather, critical self-consciousness provides an opportunity for a more genuine dialogue between performance and critique: the hollow posture of aloofness and objectivity can give way to an engagement with more profound questions about what constitutes the pleasures of theatre. (10)

Though over twenty years have passed since the publication of Leonard's article, the myth of objectivity persists.[6] However, current technologies have also enabled an environment in which Leonard's vision of "critical self-consciousness" seems more possible.

While readers can follow a print critic over time and come to understand his/her perspective, personality, and biases, blogging provides an explicit way to foreground identity and ideological positioning. This is possible not only because of a blog's unlimited word space—unconstrained by a 500-word maximum, a writer can spend time locating him/herself and his/her viewing position—but also because of the self-reflective and self-presentational nature of blogs. Perhaps Peter Holland describes it best when he writes:

> To maintain an active blog denotes a time commitment to this act of telling others about oneself, one's activities and views that

> is far beyond most of us. In the engagement with a discourse about theatre, theatre bloggers watch themselves watching in a particularly intense way, not least because of the lack of necessity in the act of blogging itself. ("'It's all about me'" 30)

This "telling others about oneself" can, of course, be selective or exaggerated or distorted, as it can in any other medium. But the fragmented nature of the blogosphere, wherein posts are added at the blogger's discretion and may not necessarily be connected to one another except by broad theme, makes such "telling" distinct. As new media theorist Jodi Dean points out, blogs and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter allow users to engage in a "performance of authenticity" by offering "friends" and followers short glimpses into their lives as they are being lived (36). Dean argues, "Blogging is a technology uncoupled from the illusion of a core, true, essential and singular self. The subjects of blogs are fragmented, appearing as neither true nor false, just appearing as whatever they happen to post" (56).

Holland's use of the word "telling" and Dean's invocation of "performance" imply a key distinction between blogging and diary-writing, to which it is often compared: bloggers write for an audience, and not just an audience of friends and family but strangers as well. While it is beyond the scope and goals of this essay to discuss blogging through a performance studies lens, I want to note the presence of a performative element in blogging and suggest that while the form offers a heightened level of self-consciousness and transparency compared to other genres, bloggers might also use it to fashion their identities in very deliberate ways and for very deliberate purposes—in the case of theatre artists and companies, often for marketing and publicity. While some scholars debate the degree of "self-staging" involved in blogging,[7] as my discussion of Pol Pelletier will illustrate, we must examine bloggers' presentation of self with a critical eye. Regardless of the authenticity of the "self" presented, however, the medium favours a foregrounding of identity through its introspective style of writing and technical features, such as profiles and blog rolls, as I will describe below. In fact, the "hollow posture of aloofness and objectivity" that Leonard identifies in mainstream reviewing is not valued in the blogosphere as it is in traditional print criticism.

Locating the particular social position from which one is speaking is a common feminist practice and feminist bloggers

engage with this practice in different ways. Jill Dolan, for example, uses her "About" sidebar and blogger profile to clearly outline her position and approach to criticism:

> I'm a writer who loves going to the theatre and the movies, watching television, reading novels, and then thinking about what all of it means. I teach at Princeton University, in the English Department and in the Lewis Center for the Arts Theatre Program. I also direct Princeton's Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies. I believe in quality writing about the arts and the importance of the arts to social life. I also believe the arts do and should give us pleasure and hope, as well as inspiring our creativity and a more expansive sense of what our lives together can be. ("About")

Dr. Parker, another feminist theatre blogger whose site, *The Feminist Critic*, shares similar goals to Dolan's, uses the same strategy; for example, she not only reveals that she is a "Feminist, Writer, Actor, Director, Yoga Teacher, Women's Studies Teacher," but also that she loves camping in her "1970 Vintage Shasta Trailer" and owns two dogs ("About Me"). These details may seem insignificant or indulgent, but if our unique identities shape the meanings we take away from theatre, then Dr. Parker's love of Bernese mountain dogs may have some bearing on how she watches a performance; our knowledge of this fact, as readers, may help us understand her criticism. This, of course, is a materialist approach to performance analysis taken to the extreme, which I use only to underline how the level of self-reflectivity and self-consciousness facilitated by the blog format might allow feminist bloggers to avoid the pretense of objectivity and the erasure of the writing subject. I am not, however, endorsing the reading of a text, whether critical or dramatic, exclusively through the lens of autobiography. Rather than privileging the critic as the sole source of meaning in his/her review, I am suggesting that a more intimate knowledge of his/her identity, values, and unique theatre-going experiences can give readers greater insight into his/her act of watching, as Holland terms it, and make the subjectivity of this process more transparent. Ideally, this leads to criticism that is not positioned as capital-T truth, but as one of many possible ways of viewing a production, opening up space for other perspectives and voices. As part of the archive, a more self-conscious criticism avoids upholding one person's voice as representative of the masses.

Bloggers also link to other blogs to help fashion and expose their identities, essentially locating themselves in the virtual world in much the same way that feminist critics position themselves in the social world. In describing this process, Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins write, "It positions the blogger's blog amongst those blogs listed; it also associates the blog with a particular style, standard or peer group with which the blogger wishes to be associated" (115). For feminist bloggers, networking in this way not only contributes to the transparency of their identities and ideological positioning, but also plays an important role in building community and political solidarity. Hyperlinking and blog-rolling represent a modern day method of creating feminist intertextuality, similar to how feminist writers and critics interweave one another's work, creating a community of shared knowledge. Nicole Stoddard's blog roll on her site *Drama, Daily* links to a wide variety of theatre blogs, from *Confessions of a Chicago Theatre Addict* to *Lee Jamieson's Shakespeare Blog*, but her "Women in Theatre" resource page and her post listing seventy-one (and counting) theatre blogs run by women help her to identify her feminist politics and make her ideological position clear. Stoddard addresses this more explicitly by reposting Jill Dolan's "Feminist Performance and Utopia" manifesto, originally published in 2007 in the edited collection *Staging International Feminisms*. Stoddard frames the manifesto with, "I share her belief, *her hope,* in the power, *the necessity* of performance to serve as a vehicle for social change. I find her use of 'utopias' as a cornerstone objective especially interesting, and I think this is partly because her thoughts are at once practical/realistic(??), yet positive and progressive" ("Feminist Performance," her italics).

For Stoddard, online networking through her blog plays a significant role in working towards the social change she and Dolan desire. Her list of women theatre bloggers was developed partly in reaction to a list of top ten theatre blogs published in *The Guardian*'s *Noises Off* blog. *The Guardian*'s list included only one female blogger, and the top five were all white men—evidence to suggest that Harp and Tremayne's findings about gender inequity in the political blogosphere translate to the theatre blogosphere as well. Stoddard's inventory creates visibility and awareness and, as the network theory informing Harp and Tremayne's study shows, has the potential to effect blog rankings by increasing linking and, ideally, traffic to women's sites. In addition to these outcomes, Stoddard describes her goals for the list project as facilitating dialogue "among women working in and/or writing about the

theatre AND among women and men working in and/or writing about the theatre" and "camaraderie, networking, and future collaboration" ("The WTB"). Stoddard's blog also satisfies the mainstream-marginal requirement by operating in both spaces: her blog roll and list of women bloggers work towards creating community, but with the broader intention of gaining access to mainstream spaces both within the blogosphere, through increased traffic to women's sites, and outside of it, through more opportunities for collaboration in the theatre world between women and men.

Accessibility, or, "Post a comment"

In addition to identifying a lack of critical self-consciousness in mainstream reviewing, scholars have highlighted its elite status, noting that the authority to review theatre in a public forum such as the newspaper is only granted to a privileged few, often those who already hold power in society.[8] While the blogosphere is constituted by complex power relations, blogging democratizes access to criticism, and has opened-up and diversified the public discourse on theatre. This democratization of access is not only reflected in online reviewing on blogs like those I have listed above, but in the comments sections of blogs and online newspapers as well. Peter Holland likens this phenomenon to "an animated discussion among friends and strangers in the pub after a performance, but within eye-shot of anyone who looked at or continues to look at *The Guardian* online" ("Critics and their Audiences" 302). The blog thread, according to Holland, creates an interpretive community in which posters see themselves as active and knowledgeable participants. Expertise is not a requirement for participation, as knowledge is measured through experience: did you see the show?[9] Or, at the very least, did you read the review to which you are responding? As Harvey, Grehan, and Tompkins point out, the blog forum also allows writers to respond to a review in a more immediate, public, and uncensored way than was previously possible, even through outlets such as letters to the editor, which are often sub-edited before publication (111).

Blogs enable feminist spectators to challenge the elite status of mainstream reviewing by publically responding to sexist reviews and participating in critical debates about gender issues. For example, while the implications of Brad Wheeler's lead in his review of the comedy show *Women Fully Clothed*—"Don't let the Kardashian witches or Whoopi Goldberg convince you otherwise

—women can be funny"—went unchallenged in the print edition of *The Globe and Mail*, its online publication the following day prompted multiple reader comments questioning the age-old stereotype that women cannot be funny. Debit Card responds first, "Women 'can be funny'? Gee, thanks," followed shortly by JB Dal Mas, "Honestly, can NO ONE review a show or movie or anything created by a woman WITHOUT having to reference that fact?" Other blog postings incite lengthier debate by asking their readers provocative questions. In February 2011, *Guardian* online writer Miriam Gillinson posted an article headlined, "No sex onstage, please, we're career women," which asked, through a discussion of two recent London productions, "Why does so much contemporary theatre stereotype working women as sharp-suited, work-addicted ball-busters with no love life or softer side?" Gillinson's question solicited thirty responses exploring this issue from a number of angles, with some historicizing the debate by citing *The Taming of the Shrew*, others insisting that dramaturgical needs trump gender stereotypes, and still others questioning the institutional barriers for female playwrights in Britain.

Indeed, the dialogue generated in these posts is a type of criticism in its own right. As Holland is careful to point out, however, forum conversations are not necessarily a dialogue between critics and readers, as critics rarely intervene in the conversation. This suggests that these spaces, while framing the articles or reviews they follow, should also be regarded as distinct from them. (In fact, a large part of the pleasure in reading a theatre blog is watching the debate unfold in the comments section.) Though blog thread debate is not always "intelligent, informed and informative" as Holland describes it ("Critics and their Audiences" 302), it represents an alternative critical discourse that can effect how a particular production is understood, and our understandings of gender and theatre more generally. For feminist artists and audiences, blogs and their forums offer spaces where the insights of feminist theory can be brought to bear on broader conversations. Jill Dolan, perhaps drawing on her own experience blogging, recommends the practice as an important way to popularize feminist methods. Reflecting on the connection between feminist theory and practice in her 2010 article, "Making a Spectacle, Making a Difference," she stresses the importance of these more popular acts of criticism: "[L]et us urge [our students] to use their skills and to apply their knowledge in the world at large, to write for the press, to create blogs, to become cultural pundits and watchdogs for

women and gender issues in the theatre. We have made a spectacle—now it is time to make a difference" (565). Even in her six-word response to Brad Wheeler, Debit Card takes on a watchdog role and adds to the critical conversation about *Women Fully Clothed*, influencing the ways in which both the review and performance are read. In essence, blogs affiliated with major newspapers offer feminists the opportunity to infiltrate the mainstream and potentially usurp a sexist or otherwise problematic article—these are crucial spaces for developing and implementing feminist approaches to criticism.

Power, or, "Preaching to the Converted"(?)

A third and often-debated problem with mainstream criticism, and the final issue I will discuss here, is the unequal power dynamic between artists and critics. Josette Féral, in "'The Artwork Judges Them,'" sums up the historic divide between these two parties: "Theatre artists have a hard time accepting the fact that the critic is not only a self-proclaimed assessor of their work but also someone who can accuse them publicly" (309). The power afforded by the public nature of criticism is manifold and threatening to artists because, as Féral points out later in her article, the written word of the critic reaches a much wider audience than the performance he/she criticizes. This is a problem for all artists, but the implications of these power dynamics are magnified for feminist or other artists existing on the margins, whose work often fails to meet mainstream critical standards of "good art."

Feminist artists seeking to redress this power imbalance can take advantage of the options offered by the web to not only speak back to critics, but also set the terms of the critical discourse about their work in the first place. Indeed, blogging extends the event both forwards and backwards in time. Writing about the ubiquity of vlogs and blogs that "envelop the act of going to theatre," Holland sums-up, "These materials are spoken, filmed, written in the hope that the theatres' intervention into the discourses around the performance will generate an engagement, a conversation, in which their own positions will seem significant and worth listening to and reading" ("'It's all about me'" 31).

While I have spent most of this article focusing on the blogging practices of audiences, I now want to look at how theatre artist Pol Pelletier uses blogging to create community and exert control over the critical discourse about her work. I have chosen Pelletier as my case study for two main reasons. First, as an artist

and a blogger, she challenges the (artificial) boundaries between performance and criticism, as socio-political and aesthetic critique figure prominently in her creative work and web activities. In other words, Pelletier demonstrates that criticism is not a practice enacted exclusively by spectators and critics, but also by artists, whose participation can affect the cultural change promised by Dolan's vision of feminist criticism. Secondly, though Pelletier exists on the margins of the theatre scene—a positioning that is at least partially intentional as she refuses to compromise her radical beliefs and approaches to creation—her use of the web allows her to permeate more mainstream spaces and intervene in conversations about her work and women's theatre more generally. Her careful mediation between the shifting centre and peripheries of the blogosphere provide a model of feminist theatre criticism for theatre practitioners and audiences alike.

Pol Pelletier co-founded Montreal's Théâtre Expérimental des Femmes (TEF) in 1979, and has continued to produce politically charged and aesthetically innovative work since the company disbanded in 1987. She currently runs the website polpelletier.com, though until 2012 she also ran the site polpelletier.info. I examine these sites as blogs because they exhibit many characteristics of the medium: rather than just including information about Pelletier's work, they feature personal observations, notes to and from her audiences, artistic and political commentary, and excerpts from other sites and sources. Pelletier uses these forums to create a relationship with her audiences and readers and to frame her story and work on her own terms. These objectives are especially important given her long-standing, tenuous relationship with mainstream criticism and the limited discourse surrounding her oeuvre in the first place. She achieves them by using her blog in three main ways: to critically reflect on her work and share these insights with her readers; to shape her identity as an artist by engaging in broader socio-political discussions; and to frame and validate her work through (selectively) reposting and linking to outside criticism.

As a blogger, Pelletier offers her readers interpretive strategies with which to approach her work, thereby affirming the importance of her perspective in critical conversations about it. One of the key ways she does this is by providing detailed information about each of the performances in her repertory, including an extensive description of the show, its story, themes, and production history. This is not unique, as many companies

and artists include information about past productions on their websites. However, her level of detail is more than most, with a full page dedicated to each production. Moreover, Pelletier's language and focus on themes in her production descriptions take on an interpretive function that few artist- or theatre-run websites attempt. Pelletier describes her 2005-2008 production *Une contrée sauvage appelée Courage* (*A Savage Land Called Courage*)[10] in four short paragraphs and just under 250 words, weaving her interpretation into a description of the performance. She introduces its themes as ones that are fundamental to her oeuvre—the true role of the artist, and the role of the feminine in the history of humanity:

> *Pol Pelletier a créé un personnage de mendiante car elle considère que cet archétype se rapproche de l'essence même de l'artiste. Les véritables artistes et les mendiant.e.s [sic] seraient-ils les derniers êtres libres? Pol Pelletier résiste à l'image de l'artiste devenue docile fonctionnaire de l'État. Elle cherche l'artiste-offrande, l'artiste-dépouillement, l'artiste-dépassement et l'artiste-guérisseuse.*
>
> (Pol Pelletier has created a beggar character because she considers this archetype as approaching the true essence of the artist. Will true artists and beggars be the last free beings? Pol Pelletier resists the image of the artist as docile servant of the state. She is searching for the artist-offering, artist-examiner, far-reaching-artist, and artist-healer.)

Beyond giving her readers a sense of the production, Pelletier reinforces her goals and concerns as an artist, suggests the performance's underlying meanings, and develops broader implications about the importance of art. Through this interpretive role, Pelletier asserts her place in larger critical conversations and also supports the community-building function of her blog by giving her readers access to personal insights not available elsewhere.

Recognizing that many readers may not have seen *Une contrée sauvage*, Pelletier also uses her site to intervene in the critical discourse of theatre history more generally. As a controversial and too-often forgotten figure in Canadian theatre, Pelletier uses her blogging practices to rewrite her own place in history and affirm the significance of her works. This revisiting of the past has deep roots as a feminist practice, as redressing women's under-representation within dominant historical narra-

tives has been a central goal of feminist critics and scholars from the Second Wave onward (see Austin). For example, a section on the currently unavailable polpelletier.info entitled "*De Pol à vous*," features a post entitled, "*Une grande fraude intéllectuelle: Espace GO a 30 ans*" ("A Great Intellectual Fraud: Espace GO Turns 30 years old"). This post, framed as a letter to her readers under the title "From Pol to You," is a more detailed version of an ad she took out in Montreal's *Le Devoir* and an email she sent to her list in 2010. In this post, Pelletier disputes the Montreal theatre company's celebration of its thirtieth anniversary because of its claims that it is an outgrowth of the TEF. Pelletier denies its ties to the company she co-founded and insists that it is therefore twenty years old, not thirty. She argues that L'Espace GO has abandoned its feminist roots, and through contrasting its history with her own, distinguishes her work and identity as "genuinely" radical and political. Perhaps just as important as the post's content is its presentation. Pelletier uses a rounded font that resembles handwriting and addresses her readers in the page title. The sense of intimacy thereby created, however, does not require that Pelletier know her readers personally: part of the power of this letter is that a simple Google search of "L'Espace GO" can yield it, making it accessible to anyone and everyone who has access to a computer. Its placement in the blogosphere means that the letter can influence the public record and critical discourse about Pelletier, the TEF, and L'Espace GO.

While the blogosphere is ephemeral in some ways, with the possibility of posts being removed at any moment or web addresses expiring (as polpelletier.info has), it is also, paradoxically, permanent. Dean explains:

> Even if the entire blog is deleted, the fact that posts can be copied, pasted, and repeated, that they can drift and circulate throughout the information networks of communicative capitalism, gives them a kind of haunting permanence. Posts are blogs' immortal remainders, revenants that once released can never be fully contained. The capacity of blog posts to circulate endlessly means that even dead blogs persist as digital zombies. (47)

Pelletier harnesses this haunting permanence and threat of non-containment. Her letter has the potential to continue reproducing itself in a way that printed materials do not—hence the importance of her using her blog and email list in tandem with

the newspaper advertisement to contest L'Espace GO's history. Her strategic use of the web allows her to infiltrate the mainstream and permanently change the official discourse about her work, while retaining the subversive power of her marginal positions both within the theatre scene and the virtual world.

Pelletier also complements posts about her work and history as an artist with posts about socio-political issues. The "*Pol veut vous faire connaître*" ("Pol wants you to know") section of polpelletier.com contains two important entries to this end: a text by Maurice Zundel that Pelletier feels describes her approach to acting (which she has marked-up for its use of the generic male personal pronoun), and an homage to Quebec feminist Marie-Andrée Bertrand, who passed away in 2001. Additionally, her media sections on both sites contain interview clips of Pelletier speaking about the Montreal Massacre, an event she sees as forever altering women's position in Quebec and which she references in multiple solo shows. This social and political commentary, not unusual for the blog format, adds to the identity Pelletier fashions through her web activity, however fragmented it may seem. If on her blog Pelletier acts as an artist and a critic, then these posts contribute to her transparency and help her to avoid the pretense of objectivity discussed earlier. Because her artistic work is so closely connected to her political convictions and activism, these posts act as crucial paratexts and offer additional insight into her performances and the critiques embedded within them. They also point to the interconnectedness between theatre criticism and socio-political criticism: the former, like theatre itself, often incorporates the latter.

Finally, Pelletier uses her blogs to legitimize her work through others' words, selectively posting links to reviews, interviews, and letters sent to her by audience members. For example, the "Pol veut vous faire connaître" page of polpelletier.com features two letters posted in reaction to her latest piece, *La robe blanche* (*The White Dress*). These detailed letters describe each spectator's transformative experience watching Pelletier perform her solo show about the history of Quebec, women's oppression, and sexual violence. The first writer, Chantal, describes bringing a friend to the show who is, like Pelletier's character, a child abuse survivor. Chantal writes at length about how her friend was moved by the performance, and asks Pelletier about the experiences that apparently inspired it. These personal stories of the power of Pelletier's performances stand in contrast to professional

critics' reviews, which tend to assume a distanced, objective voice that ignores the embodied and emotional experience of engaging with a performance. This is one of Holland's key criticisms of academic writing and his reason for exploring blogging in his own work. Pelletier's audience letters, then, present another side of the experience of watching her work. Although these letters likely serve publicity and marketing purposes, they also allow Pelletier to validate her audience's voices and continue the dialogue she has initiated in the theatre.

Pelletier's online activities could be characterized as "preaching to the converted," as they delineate a particular community and often assume a like-minded or amenable audience. Indeed, the blogosphere is a useful place for this activity, as "conversion," like community, is not a static state, but one that must be actively created. Tim Miller and David Román argue, "'the converted' needs to be understood as a dynamic assembly that both individually and communally enters into the space of performance to sustain the very state of conversion" (qtd in Shalson 226). This does not only happen in the space of performance: through her online activities, Pelletier actively engages her audience and readers in building a feminist community. The web also allows her to connect with her audience more frequently than she would through face-to-face contact at productions and other events such as workshops or fundraisers, and to expand her network beyond the geographic boundaries of Montreal and Quebec. This community-building function of feminist theatre blogging is inextricably connected to its critical function: if feminist theatre bloggers ultimately aim to transform the institutions of theatre and criticism, then an integral first step is creating and maintaining an activist community that can work together to counter hegemonic discourse, whether online or off. In this sense, Pelletier's use of blogging can be considered within the framework of virtual consciousness-raising introduced earlier. Whether disputing l'Espace GO's history or generating dialogue about the Montreal Massacre, Pelletier's online activities connect feminist audiences, artists, and readers who are advocating for social, political, and artistic change. By working in both the margins and the mainstream of the blogosphere, Pelletier challenges dominant paradigms of performance and criticism while retaining the subversive power that can be accessed outside the constraints of hegemonic critical perspectives.

Conclusion

I have argued that the transformative power of feminist blogging lies in audiences' and artists' strategic intervention into the centres and peripheries of the blogosphere. Perhaps the next step in shifting the power dynamics with mainstream reviewers will be exploring the possibilities for independent and balanced dialogue online. This would be more complicated than feminists commenting on web forums or replying to critics' posts on *Twitter*—reviewers, too, would have to change their roles and objectives. Reviewers do not generally write for theatre workers, but for audiences seeking guidance on how to spend their money. A true artist-critic dialogue would thus have to happen beyond the confines of an online newspaper or the safe space of an artist or company website. This kind of "third space" is not a utopic one. Indeed, the blogosphere is, in some ways, an ideal place for an equitable dialogue about theatre because of the distinction between online and offline identities discussed earlier. While mainstream-marginal power dynamics are still present on the web, the blogosphere also holds the potential for bloggers to temporarily escape their embodied and material realities, discard differences, and create virtual solidarities. If bloggers can access sources of power in these ways, then a search for a level playing field for discussion and debate on the web is worthwhile.

Finally, as scholars, we might examine the blogosphere in more depth and grant legitimacy to the critical acts that occur in it. The limited literature on theatre blogging I cited earlier has not yet explored the political implications of our engagement with criticism. Relying on newspaper reviews in our work as theatre historians gives us a limited view of audience response; moreover, especially in the case of feminist and other marginalized artists, it ignores the reactions of the community for whom the productions are targeted. Such tendencies risk overlooking the significance of particular productions or leaving them out of the archive altogether, which can have material and ideological consequences for marginalized companies and artists. While not all critical commentary is created equal, the diverse voices that have been given a forum on the web allow us to get a better picture of the varied responses to theatrical productions, beyond those of "white, middle-class, middle aged spreaders." Through our use of blogs to archive productions and write histories, we can also contribute to diluting the power of the hegemonic critic and answer HardHead's prayers. ❁

Notes

1 I wish to thank my dissertation committee, Nancy Copeland, Mariel O'Neill-Karch, and Paula Sperdakos, for their feedback on the chapter from which this essay is adapted. I also thank Kym Bird and Paul Halferty for their input on subsequent drafts of the article, and the *TRiC* editorial team, especially Marlis Schweitzer and the two anonymous reviewers.

2 In 2007, *The Guardian* online featured a series called "Who needs reviews?" in which a number of its arts critics answered the question, "Do reviewers have a role in today's web-savvy world?" See http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/theatre/who_needs_reviews/ for links to each of the articles.

3 For a discussion of how theatre criticism has historically perpetuated gendered binaries of mind/body, text/performance, see Stefka Mihaylova's "Whose Performance Is It Anyway?" and Lara Shalson's "Creating Community, Constructing Criticism." Susan Sontag, in her foundational essay "Against Interpretation," argues that criticism, in its emphasis on interpreting meaning, displaces the sensory experience of engaging with a work of art. More recently, Matthew Reason has taken-up Sontag's vision of criticism—though not from a feminist perspective—in his book *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*. For a discussion of historiography and the ways in which criticism figures in how women's dramatic work is remembered in the historical record, see Dorothy Hadfield's *Re: Producing Women's Dramatic History*.

4 While I have been unable to find a comparable study to Harp and Tremayne's to update their results, sites like technorati.com, a leading blog search engine indexing more than a million blogs, release annual user demographics that support the trends they identified. *Technorati*'s 2011 "State of the Blogosphere" report shows a ratio of three-fifths to two-fifths of male versus female bloggers, but its top 100 list, updated daily, reveals a more drastic gender gap similar to the one reported in Harp and Tremayne's study.

5 See Shalson for a detailed discussion of the role of community-based performance in fostering alternative critical perspectives and modes of performance. Robert Wallace discusses the potential power of marginality in *Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada*.

6 For a more recent study of how the myth of objectivity manifests in mainstream theatre criticism, see Robert Nunn's analysis of Ray Conlogue's tenure at *The Globe and Mail* in Anton Wagner's *Establishing Our Boundaries*.

7 For further discussion on blogging as performance, see the first chapter of Dean's *Blog Theory*. Both Ashley Donnelly's and Adriana Braga's contributions in Ames and Burcon's *Women and Language* discuss the performative element of blogging and Internet communication through Erving Goffman's work. Melissa Gregg also invokes the language of performance, though it is less of a focus, in her article on the politics of gender and blogs in Bruns and Jacobs's *Uses of Blogs*.

8 I have already touched on this criticism in reference to Dolan's and Collins's work; it is also at the centre of Wallace's *Producing Marginality*.

9 For a discussion of the shift in emphasis on experience over expertise in contemporary reviewing practices, see Linda Hutcheon's "Reviewing Reviewing Today."

10 All translations in this article are my own.

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