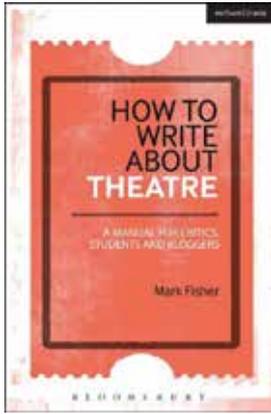


BOOK REVIEWS

Kelli Zezulka reviews two new additions to her library



How to Write about Theatre by Mark Fisher

Critics, eh? You spend months (sometimes years) putting your sweat, blood and tears into a production only for some faceless name in a newspaper or on a blog to tear it

to pieces. Or, worse perhaps, not even mention your contribution. For someone who has been the subject of a less-than-glowing review, it is tempting to think that critics are somehow against us, "a case in point of everything that is wrong, false, misleading, contradictory and disastrous in this society" – just one of the many accusations cited against critics in this book.

Mark Fisher will be known to many of you as our longstanding Edinburgh lighting critic (this year's roundup starts on page 18). In fact, Mark is a theatre critic, editor, feature writer and freelance journalist, and has written for the *Guardian*, *Variety*, *Theatre Scotland* and

the Scottish Theatre Blog. He was one of the panel members on the ALD's seminar at PLASA in Leeds last year, where he contributed to a discussion on what makes a good lighting design. In short, the range and quality of his experience makes him perfectly suited to write this "manual for critics, students and bloggers" (the book's subtitle).

The book is divided into twenty easy-to-follow "How to" chapters (How to do your research, How to write opinions, How to write about emotions, etc.). In the foreword, Chris Jones, chief theatre critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, points out that, "To write about theatre, you have to actually write." Very true – which is why the text is interspersed with exercises, challenging the reader (and, presumably, budding writer) to stretch their abilities and consider alternative perspectives and methods.

The chapter that will most interest *Focus* readers is How to write about the production. In the section headed *Lighten up*, Mark recalls his conversation with lighting designer John Bishop following the seminar in Leeds and John's use of simile to describe the function of lighting, comparing the stage to an aquarium and the lighting designer to a composer (not in the same simile, sadly!) – both useful ways for critics and others to begin to think about and understand lighting design. Mark picks out

some key words that are often used to describe lighting – atmospheric, evocative, moody – and argues for finding the right vocabulary "to define what the atmosphere was, what quality was evoked and, indeed, what particular mood you had in mind". As lighting designers, the same applies to our conversations with directors and other designers. In fact, there is much in this book for lighting designers and, indeed, all members of the production team to consider. Whether or not we are consciously analysing and writing about theatre in the same way as a critic, we, as practitioners, are thinking about the same things in our work: finding our voice, reacting in the moment, considering emotions, culture, society and politics. It was this realisation that made me think that our professions have much more in common than might be initially apparent. As Mark writes, "the most complete form of review ... is one that pays due respect to the theatremakers' achievement", ensuring a "respectful, creative and fruitful relationship between critic and theatremaker".

How to Write about Theatre: A Manual for Critics, Students and Bloggers
By Mark Fisher
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