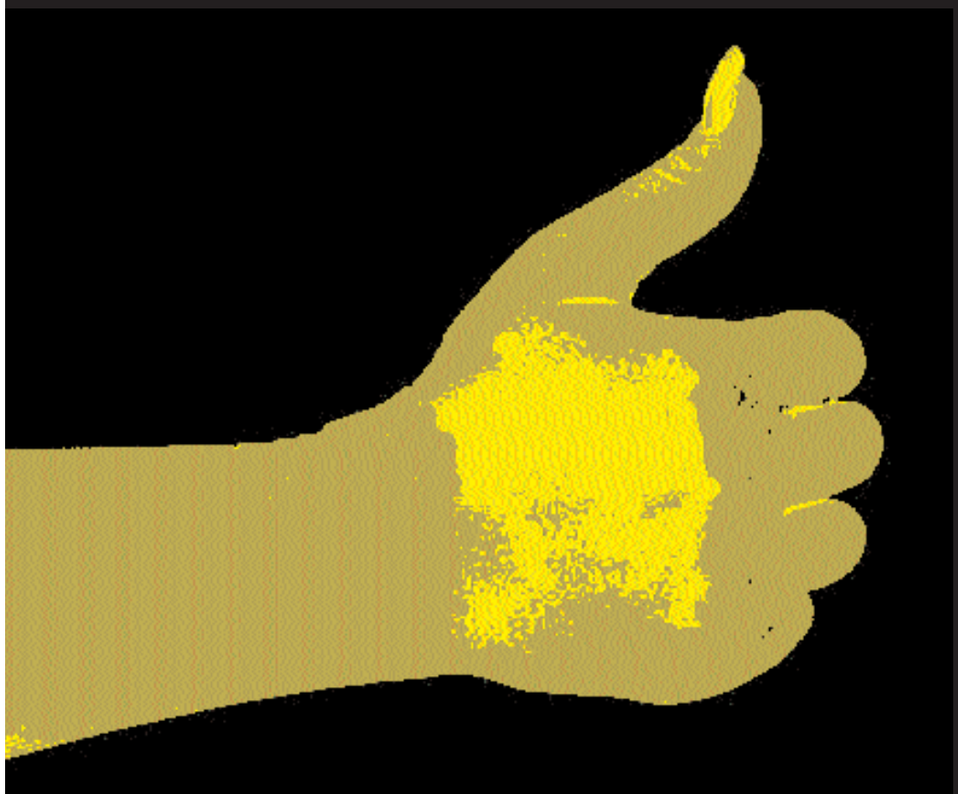

You've Never Looked Better!:

WHY ARTISTS WON'T TALK OPENLY ABOUT EACH OTHER'S WORK

BY JOHN HABICH

YOU'VE NEVER LOOKED BETTER!:
WHY ARTISTS WON'T TALK OPENLY ABOUT EACH OTHER'S WORK

The day that the first largely negative review I had ever written appeared in the newspaper, the director of the play in question had a stroke. He lay in a coma for six days, and then died.

At his memorial service, the minister wistfully recalled seeing the poor fellow on opening night, when he had been terribly worried that critics would misunderstand his bold vision of "Hamlet"—an interpretation that saw Elsinore Castle decorated in Danish Modern furniture and the gravediggers swilling malt liquor while singing "Take This Job and Shove It."

I learned fast and hard that when one produces work for public inspection, he or she cannot expect universal approval, and I learned that one must live with criticism. Or, as was the case with this unfortunate director, not.

Another casualty of that review was my roommate Alan, who played Horatio. My greenhorn editor did not see the point in reassigning the review, as I had suggested, despite the apparent conflict of interest. I merely had to vouch that our friendship would not get in the way of my professional honesty. Since I have always believed honesty to be an essential ingredient of friendship, I gave my word. My review criticized Alan for rushing his lines, and he was miffed for a few days. But he lived, and we remained friends.

Cut to fall of 2000. After years of playwriting and acting while working unrelated day jobs, Alan had become a hot commodity in Hollywood. He had created a new sitcom, about which he was extremely excited. Of course, so was I. My old friend, executive-producing his own show! I enthusiastically told everyone I knew to tune in. Most of the people I'd told about the show hated it. When I went online to drum up interest in the appropriate chat rooms, I was flamed by battalions of armchair critics. I was surprised at first by the negative reaction. The show was marked by the same double-edged humor that had earned Alan a gigantic reputation for his first screenplay, "American Beauty." I didn't understand why the TV series wasn't catching on, so I started to interview people about it. I came up with a theory, and decided to write a letter to Alan about it on the off-chance that it might help.

When I told a Broadway producer friend about this letter as I drafted it, he looked at me as if I had just wet my pants on camera. "Are you nuts?" he asked me. I had good reason for writing the letter. The show's ratings stank. But from what I'd heard, everyone around Alan was warbling happily. I felt I had a responsibility to say, "Hey, Absalom, maybe you ought to watch out for that branch!"

When I explained this to my friend, he replied, "Did he ask you for your opinion? No? Then if you want to keep him as a friend, shut up and mind your own business."

I consulted a couple of mutual friends, who indicated they would no longer *be* my friends if I ever indulged in such an honesty binge about their own work. So I never sent that letter. Alan's show was pulled, moved to a different time slot, weakly promoted, and then allowed to die quietly in December.

The experience left me with this nagging conundrum: Artists would seem to be the best qualified to discuss one another's work. Yet they rarely do—and

certainly not with each other, or in any open, forthright manner. Formal interviews with about 20 artists in various fields—pop and classical musicians, actors, directors and playwrights—and informal conversations with many more yielded a murky lack of consensus about why. Most respondents agreed that uninhibited, frank discussion of other artists' creative outpourings was taboo; despite artists' justifiable renown for colorful backbiting, they would rather chew raw tripe than offer straightforward feedback about each other's work. Even those who routinely proffer their opinions adhere to widely varying personal rules: only when asked directly; only when talking with a reliably discreet third party; only when the other artist works in the same field as their own; only when they know the other artist intimately; or, conversely, only when they don't know the other artist at all.

Said Michael Feingold, theater critic for the *Village Voice*: "It's a matter of context—of their closeness to you, of the degree of trust between you, of what you need to hear and they need to say. A book's worth of transactional analysis could be written on that."

Of all the variables that guide would-be artist-critics, the most often cited is whether or not an assessment has been solicited by the artist. "I never offer constructive criticism unless I'm asked for it," said playwright and screenwriter Nancy Oliver of Los Angeles, "and when someone does ask me for it, I ask her what kind of criticism she's looking for and respond appropriately. It makes no difference if they work in my medium or another, since part of being an artist is thinking I know everything about everything. I am happy to criticize anything with great authority if given the opportunity."

Like many others, Oliver believes that criticism should not be leveled unless the subject seeks it. She said she has "definitely benefited from an honest go-round when I've asked for opinions, and I'm mentally and emotionally prepared to listen." On the other hand, she said, "People should keep their mouths shut unless I ask for their ideas." If others offer criticism when she hasn't invited it—and isn't in a frame of mind to consider it—she finds an excuse to leave the scene.

Obie Award-winning playwright Ain Gordon of New York shares Oliver's caution. "I do not 'offer' criticism—constructive or otherwise—to anybody, ever, unless they ask, or I hate them. If they ask, and we have enough of a relationship for me to know how they listen, what they hear and what stage the work is in, I start talking. When people I don't really know ask, I generally skirt the issue, because I don't know the context of their question or their readiness to hear."

Even professional critics often have misgivings about face-to-face honesty toward artists. Most of them wouldn't dream of popping backstage after a show or attending an opening-night reception and, unless prodded or professionally obligated to do otherwise, will mouth the same indefinite platitudes as any other onlooker when asked, in person, "How did you like my work?" From the safely impersonal distance of the published page, however, the career critic routinely disregards whether the artists whose work he describes are "ready to hear" his views. The art that the critic is analyzing, in most cases, is the result of collaboration, and the contexts in which any criticism will be digested are as numerous as the people involved.

To the degree that those people and relationships differ, the critic is destined to be misunderstood because all the participants will be listening for different things. One legend details an exchange between a press rep and a costume designer backstage at a Broadway musical. The press rep says, "I saw 'South Pacific' last night—what a wonderful show!" to which the costume designer replies, "You liked that show? The seams on the clothes are *this* thick!" Given the variety of personal investments in any collaborative work of art, the critic's remarks will be decried as inappropriate or off-target by many of the collaborators.

Yet, the critic's work may serve a useful function even to those who dismiss or belittle it: The review can serve as a deflective tangent that enables artists to talk more honestly. Instead of focusing nakedly on the quality of one another's work, they talk about what the review *says* about that work. The subject at hand turns away from the worthiness or ineptitude of the artists' work,

THE DEGREE OF HONESTY YOU GET FROM YOUR PEERS IS OF COURSE A FUNCTION OF POWER: THE MORE POWER YOU HAVE, THE LESS HONEST FEEDBACK YOU GET.

and toward the degree to which the piece of published criticism is appropriate, fair or accurate.

This is perhaps why artists *love* reviews, as long as they are about someone else: They provide a socially acceptable excuse for dishing about the art. As novelist Walter Kirn wrote in a *New York Times* essay, "Most readers keep their marginalia private, but critics make theirs public in the hope of spurring conversation, for good or ill."

Few artists are willing to risk torpedoing a relationship that might prove useful, or even necessary, just for the sake of giving vent to a judgment. Most subdivisions of the art world are characterized by labyrinthine and constantly shifting alliances; today's friend of a friend of a friend might be next week's prospective employer.

"You could potentially really damage yourself by being horrible about someone else's work," said New York playwright Ed Napier. "People will think you're a prick, and the word will get out, and unless you've already had a lot of success, people won't put up with you."

Ain Gordon emphatically agrees. "Never criticize somebody's work to a third party—never, never! Or you'll end up with that person one day coming up to you and saying, 'I heard you didn't like my blah-blah-blah.' What a nightmare! If you want them to know, speak: otherwise, don't tell anyone except your lover."

Or maybe not even then, if it's your lover's "blah-blah-blah" that you didn't like. "My wife is really honest about my work, and sometimes I get really angry with her," said Napier. "She's not always right."

Who can blame artists for being skittish about criticism and full of animosity toward critics (whom they can lambaste in grand, emotive style, since the critic will probably never be in a position to hire them)? The artist's life grinds from rejection to rejection to rejection; this actor or novelist or portrait painter has no job security and has to prove himself or herself over and over

in a buyer's market. The artist is turned down first by schools, then by agents, then by casting directors or gallery owners or publishers or movie producers. Then the book comes out or the movie or exhibition opens and the critic tanks the artist, or the audience doesn't show up. In such a self-invalidating ecosystem, no wonder the artist wants supportive, suck-ass boosterism from colleagues and friends.

Nowhere is the artist's fear of undermining tomorrow's alliance with today's critical remark more apparent than in literary circles. The editors of book-review sections constantly lament how hard it is to weed out symbiotic suck-ups from those courageous few that own up to more than the slightest cavil about a book. Kirn, a former book critic for *New York* magazine, wrote that most book critics "blunt any hard edges in their pronouncements with strings of 'nevertheless'es and 'however's."

And the bigger the writer's reputation, the less the likelihood of a passionate review, positive or negative. "Famous writers are critics in the same way crocodiles are carnivores—from birth, by training and by instinct," Kirn wrote. "But in public, with rare exceptions, they come on like saints and vegetarians."

Literary agent Jonathon Lazear advises his clients to stay away from reviewing other authors' books unless they are already familiar with and enthusiastic about the other writer's body of work. "I don't think it gets anyone anywhere to pan someone else's book," he said. "What good does it do, unless it's fraud on a grand scale?"

The degree of honesty you get from your peers is of course a function of power: The more power you have, the less honest feedback you get. Is the singer premiering your new composition a brand-name diva? Is the actor in the lead of your play a former TV star? Did the director win a MacArthur "genius" grant? "It's best when people are working together genuinely, because they care about making the absolute best piece," said Kira Obolensky, a Minneapolis playwright and translator. "I've been in a situation where [as

the playwright] I was really, really unhappy with an actor's performance from the get-go, but he was very well-known. . . . I went to the producer and the director and said, 'I feel we're missing a lot of subtlety,' and I was looked upon as if I were a crazy person. The reviews came out and agreed with what I'd said, but there was no dialogue at that point."

Writers rarely seek the opinions of others beyond a carefully winnowed group of trusted intimates. Said Lazear, who represents writers as varied as anthropologist Jane Goodall and social satirist Al Franken, "It's a little bit like asking people, 'So, what do you think of my kids? Do you think one of them's a little dumber than the other? Would this one hold your interest more than 10 minutes?' No one's going to say, 'My, that's an unfortunate-looking child you have there! I'm sure at an appropriate age you can take him in to see a surgeon.' "

Artists frequently talk about their works as their children, and about the creative process as one of gestation and painful birthing. They are defensive beyond reason in much the same way parents are about their little darlings, and like all too many parents, artists have a hard time separating their own identities from those of their offspring.

"An artist often does not live for money. A lot of what you're offering is part of your soul, a spiritual thing," said Napier. "It's so incredibly personal. You feel you've offered the very best of yourself, and you've exposed yourself in a way no one else does." That's why it hurts so much when the artist meets with uninvited criticism. "When people hate something or don't give a shit, it's so wounding, and it makes you crazy," he said.

Many artists develop their creative and interpretive skills as methods of escaping, or working through, deep personal pain. All too conscious of their own raw vulnerability, artists hesitate to assault a peer who's probably just as bruisable. "Theater people are just needbags," said Obolensky. "You go into theater because you're damaged in some way and crave public acceptance. Maybe that's why we all try to be kind to each other: It could be empathy."

Occasional failure is considered an inevitability among people who strive to make careers in the arts. It's tough enough to deal with the fact of that failure; what the artist needs is encouragement to keep trying, not an insightful analysis of why he or she bombed. "You make a lot of mistakes along the way," said Napier, "and you have to make them to make something wonderful (eventually). You don't want to crush someone so badly that they don't want to create something again."

Artist after artist talked about the importance of "finding something to like" in another's work. "Many musicians feel comfortable talking about what they like about an artist," said singer-songwriter Judy Collins. "I am better at talking about things I love passionately than things I feel are not up to my standards."

On the other hand, one need not look far to find a rich tradition of audacious backbiting among artists. The tradition itself has been chronicled in such varied works as "The Last Tycoon," "Once in a Lifetime," "All About Eve," Woody Allen's "Bullets Over Broadway" and David Mamet's "Speed-the-Plow." Said Feingold, "Gossip is one of the lifebloods of the theater. Go out with two people from a show and you'll hear about the other 18, and what the two you are with don't like about them. I've had two actors call me up within a half-hour of one another the day a review came out, saying, 'I have to tell the truth about this director'—one defending [that director] and the other attacking viciously."

If you're going to talk about someone else's work—whether you are a professional critic or an artist among artists—your success will depend largely on your style and timing. One of the main reasons critics are reviled is that as journalists, they are called upon to describe and judge soon after the exhibition is hung or the curtain rises, when the artists who have concocted the object of the review are 100-percent Achilles heels—highly vulnerable. The critics, therefore, are 100-percent just plain heels. "On opening night, I just want to hear people say, 'Good job, good work!' " said Minneapolis theater director and producer Casey Stangl. "I'm too vulnerable, too close to it. I can tell anyway."

“THEATER PEOPLE ARE JUST NEEDBAGS,” SAID OBOLENSKY. “YOU GO INTO THEATER BECAUSE YOU’RE DAMAGED IN SOME WAY AND CRAVE PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE.”

New York director Stephen DiMenna could handle a little more frankness. “If I direct a bad show and somebody says, ‘I loved it! I loved it! I loved it!’ and I know there are flaws in it, I think, ‘What an idiot!’ and I know they want something from me.” He would rather someone tell the truth, warts and all—but in a diplomatic fashion, also pointing out whatever positive aspects there are to be found in order to present a balanced viewpoint of the show.

As for timing, you should gauge how exposed the artist feels and weigh it against what your criticism might accomplish at that point. If you are not a professional critic facing a deadline, keep it to yourself on opening night. I can say that with great authority, having not long ago seen a production of my first theater piece in years. It was only one comic scene on a bill with three other seedling works in a cozy little playhouse, but it was public in an unnerving way that Sunday newspaper profiles are not—because it was not about somebody else. I was thrilled just to get through the first performance without Depends. But I made the mistake of sitting next to one of my closest friends, who sat through my whole thing as impassively as an Easter Island head. After years of debating the merits of other people’s art with him, I was profoundly disappointed that, for me, he could not summon the will to play-act, or even to lie outright.

In the case of my friend Alan, when we finally talked about his show face to face six months after it went under, he confirmed that I had done the right thing by not sending that letter. What good would it have done? By the time it would have arrived, all the episodes had been written and nearly all of them filmed, and Alan was dealing with a pestilence of network executives and their multifarious, maddening notes. He didn’t need another “why dontcha” from another direction. He needed support. Critics are pretty easy to come by, compared with friends.

His new TV show, “Six Feet Under,” has just debuted. I saw the pilot a few months ago. It’s on HBO, so he has a lot more creative freedom than he had on a Big Three network, and he directed the pilot himself. The show is wildly funny one minute and gut-wrenching the next, and I really loved it. Really. I told him so immediately afterward, and later that night, and after watching the first episode again the next day.

If I hadn’t liked it, though, I probably wouldn’t have told him—not right after we watched the thing together, at any rate.

And I certainly wouldn’t say anything to YOU about it.