

THE PRESS

LOTS OF NOISE, NOT ENOUGH VOICES: NEW YORK'S THEATER MEDIA

IN A COUNTRY where single-newspaper towns are now the norm, the fact that New York City is served by three major dailies—the *Post*, the *Daily News* and *The Times*—as well as Long Island-based *Newsday* seems a comparative luxury. But it's a far cry from the days when New Yorkers could choose from among seven newspapers. In the 1950s and early '60s, when a number of now-shuttered papers were still in business, the *Times* competed with the *Herald Tribune* for the dominant role in covering the theater scene.

New York may not literally be a one-paper town these days, but when it comes to theater coverage, *The Times* certainly wields overwhelming influence. The prevailing sense, in the words of Lincoln Center's Bernard Gersten, is that if a production isn't covered in *The Times*, "it doesn't really happen." Though the *Post* and the *Daily News* publish a significant amount of writing on the theater, their influence is seen as negligible by theater professionals in terms of critical standing and audience-building. Those other papers, Lynn Moffat of New York Theatre Workshop said bluntly, "don't matter." Asked if there's any benefit to a positive review in the *Post*, Gersten answered, "Yes. We can reprint the review [in an advertisement] in *The Times*."

Newsday's theater coverage is extensive—in terms of sheer volume, in fact, it nearly matches that of *The Times*. But perhaps because of *Newsday's* suburban orientation, its critical judgments don't come close to matching its larger rival's in importance. Gersten voices a commonly held view of *Newsday's* admired chief critic, Linda Winer, when he observes that "her influence is not as great as her opinions."

Television and radio are barely factors, with the exception of the occasional light piece on local cable network NY1 about a Broadway opening, the annual Tony Awards broadcast and sporadic appearances of theater

luminaries such as Tom Stoppard or Peter Brook on public television.

Weekly magazines boast some strong contributors to the theater-media landscape. *The New Yorker* remains the city's most distinguished and respected weekly voice. Its chief critic, John Lahr, who shares reviewing duties with Nancy Franklin, is most often singled out as the contemporary writer whose essays on the theater will be read by future generations, as one can now read the collected criticism of Eric Bentley or Walter Kerr. *New York* magazine's John Simon, who also writes film reviews for the *National Review*, receives similar accolades in some quarters; other theater professionals, though, complain that he can be overly harsh. (In the words of one, Simon is "more gimlet-eyed satirist than actual critic.") *The New Republic's* Robert Brustein, known for his experience and sagacity, is often given the space for lengthy essays on the theater, a rarity these days. *Time* and *Newsweek* run theater reviews only occasionally; the era of substantial theater coverage in the national newsweeklies is effectively over.

The *Village Voice's* Michael Feingold is a respected veteran critic, but more for his coverage of downtown shows and theater festivals that do not get significant attention from *The Times* than for his assessments of high-profile shows. *Time Out New York* helps fill some of the gaps, with substantial coverage and listings of off-off-Broadway productions. Trade magazines such as *Backstage* and *Variety*, despite their broad industry coverage, are rarely mentioned in discussions regarding theater in the media; their circulations—less than one-tenth that of the dailies—are too small to have much impact on ticket sales or broad public opinion.

Online theater Web sites such as oobr.com (the Off-Off-Broadway Review), aislesay.com and theatermania.com run more comprehensive listings than does the *Times*, but aren't seen as serious players in terms of critical voice. Nor do they claim such a role, said Robert Viagas, editor of Broadway

Online. “None of the places I’ve worked at [including Playbill Online, which he co-founded] have ever had a ‘voice-of-God’ critic,” Viagas said. “We let readers write the reviews. It’s a living document. We are printing the word of mouth.”

ALL HAIL KING *TIMES*?

The Times’ reputation as the most influential outlet for theater coverage is borne out by statistics. The audiences for Broadway plays include more readers of *The New York Times* than the combined totals of the *Daily News*, *USA Today*, the *New York Post*, the *Newark Star-Ledger* and the *Village Voice*.¹

According to *Times* culture editor John Darnton, the paper has an affinity for theater that it doesn’t necessarily hold for other art forms. “We don’t particularly root to have good movies out there for the summer,” he said. “But the theater occupies a special psychological niche for all of us because it’s in our backyard, because it’s associated with New York.” Nevertheless, after Sept. 11, *The Times* felt no impulse to treat theater as if it were a wounded stepchild. “The theater should be strong and should be strong enough to take it,” Darnton suggested.

The paper did make one concession to weakened theater business: the temporary addition of a box on the front page of the arts section called “What’s Doing in Town.” Its aim, Darnton said, was to “try to boost the industry a little.”

Some theater professionals complain that *The Times* can be disdainful of public opinion. “*The Times*, at one time, used to repeat a negative review of ‘Cats’ every week” among its capsule listings, said Gerald Schoenfeld, chairman of the Shubert Organization. “After about five or six years, I went over to see the executive editor of the paper, [then] Abe Rosenthal, and I said, ‘Isn’t there something to be said for the 500,000 people who have gone to see ‘Cats’ and enjoyed it?’ To me, there is a certain degree of—I wouldn’t call it arrogance, but dismissiveness.”

Highly critical reviews hit those in theater harder than artists in other art forms, some in the business maintain, because stage actors and directors are so enmeshed in a production at the time of its opening. (This is in contrast to a film actor or museum curator, who’s likely to have moved on to a new project by the time the reviews come out.) According to Barry Grove of the Manhattan Theatre Club, “The damage of bad reviews is very intense if they are smart-alecky, because it comes at a time when [artists] are at their most tired—physically, emotionally and psychologically. They cannot take those smart hits.”

Newspaper editors counter that to expect empathy from critics reflects a certain misunderstanding of their role. “The responsibility of the reviewer is to provide context, to provide the meaning of the play, to tell you whether or not it’s good, bad or ugly, and to tell you whether you might want to go see it,” Darnton explained. “And it kind of stops at that.” And boosterism for its own sake can backfire. “I always felt that [it’s a bad idea] to tell people that plays are better than they are,” said *Newsday*’s Linda Winer. “Then they go there and they say, ‘This is really good theater; I must not like really good theater,’ and then don’t go back.”

The Times’ pre-eminence has caused numerous myths to grow up around the paper’s coverage and practices, including the idea that it can crush any new production with ease and that its critics are a sequestered, incorruptible lot, forbidden from fraternizing with members of the theater community or taking complimentary tickets to shows. In truth, *The Times* operates its theater section essentially according to industry norms. The process by which shows get reviewed is necessarily subjective. *The Times* comes up with a laundry list of shows; the chief critic, Ben Brantley, gets first crack at the ones he wants to review and the critics in the next tier, such as Bruce Weber, choose from what’s left.

There is significant dialogue about what merits coverage between editors and critics, and

The era of substantial theater coverage in the national newsweeklies is effectively over.

Money is a crucial factor, and shows with enough cash behind them can often persevere despite negative critical reaction.

among the writers themselves. “How do we know a show’s important? We don’t,” Darnton said. “But we suspect. There’s already a buzz out. I’m not saying we make a decision in advance as to whether it’s good or bad—just whether we view it as significant in some way. It doesn’t even, obviously, have to be a Broadway show. It could be something off-Broadway. It could be ‘The Seagull’ in Central Park.”

As at any other newspaper, *Times* critics accept free tickets to shows, Darnton said. And though writers police themselves by declining to review any show that might raise conflict-of-interest questions, the idea that there is a rigid, codified system that controls critics’ behavior is largely a fiction. “I covered theater as a reporter long before I was a critic, and I know dozens if not hundreds of people in the theater community,” said *Times* critic Bruce Weber. “I rarely go to theater parties anymore, and I don’t go out of my way to cultivate theater contacts, but I don’t go out of my way to avoid people I know and like, either. If it happens that I have a particularly friendly relationship with someone involved in a show—and there have been a handful of such occasions—I’ll let someone else review it.”

TOURIST APPEAL, MONEY CAN CURE A BAD REVIEW

Whether *The Times* has the power to make or break a show is a more complicated question. While Frank Rich was chief critic, from 1980 to 1993, it was generally agreed that he had that kind of influence—and no qualms about using it. These days, a *Times* review still carries tremendous, unmatched weight, though neither Brantley nor Weber much exhibit the occasional gleeful nastiness that earned Rich the nickname “The Butcher of Broadway.”

Still, certain shows—those with greater appeal for tourists than for the local *Times* readership, for example—can survive a *Times* pan generally unscathed. Jack Viertel, creative director of Jujamcyn Theaters, which produced “Kiss Me Kate,” “Proof” and “The Producers” on Broadway, maintains that *The*

Times’ power is limited, particularly where high-profile musicals are concerned. “Witness the runs of ‘Smokey Joe’s Café,’ ‘Swing,’ ‘Saturday Night Fever,’ ‘Fosse,’ and ‘Annie Get Your Gun,’ all of which were dismissed by the paper’s critic,” Viertel said. “They weren’t all financially successful, but they all ran long enough to have their fates determined by word-of-mouth and economics, not critical reaction in *The Times*.”

Money is a crucial factor, of course, and shows with enough cash behind them can often persevere despite negative critical reaction. Advertising is more than twice as influential as reviews in building audiences for musicals. (See chart p. 55.) But to survive a spate of negative reviews, shows often need a hook that extends beyond the show’s mere quality. These critically immune shows “have come in here under some kind of jet propulsion,” said Gerald Schoenfeld. “They were major events in London [or] they have major stars in them. They have means of overcoming.”

When it comes to straight plays, reviews remain the single most influential factor for theatergoers in choosing a show, and are nearly twice as important as advertising. But even for straight plays, sometimes even a rave from *The Times* won’t help. In December 2000, *The Times*’ Robin Pogrebin wrote a piece headlined “Bouquets of Star-Studded Praise Can’t Keep Small Shows From Closing.” It bemoaned the fact that *The Times*’ own glowing reviews for Pamela Gien’s “The Syringa Tree,” Rob Ackerman’s “Tabletop” and August Wilson’s “Jitney” ultimately failed to make those shows commercially viable.

And it’s easy to forget that the vast majority of readers are not attuned to the niceties of critical opinion. Surprising numbers don’t understand the difference between a review and a feature story, between a positive and negative notice, or even between editorial copy and an advertisement, said Chris Boneau, partner in Boneau/Bryan-Brown, a public-relations firm that represents commercial Broadway shows. “What matters is what the ladies in the

cul-de-sac say when they see their friends and decide how they're going to go spend their \$95 on the theater evening," Boneau said.

BEYOND CRITICISM, A MIXED BAG

Theater coverage is not just reviews; it is also features, gossip and hard reporting. There, too, *The Times'* power works in ways hidden from public view. When *New York Newsday* was in existence (owned by the same company as, but distinct from, *Long Island Newsday*), it tried to compete with *The Times* in terms of breaking and covering theater news. "We got very, very little help from press agents, and from the theaters in general," said Winer, who worked for *New York Newsday* before it folded in 1995. "There was a denial of access to basic information. I would find out the schedules of theater seasons by reading *The Times*. No matter how much we would go after stories, doors would be closed in our faces because they didn't want to anger *The Times*."

As one might expect, the city's tabloids, particularly the *Post*, tend to be drawn to scandal. Theater reporter and columnist Michael Riedel of the *Post* said he enjoys covering a conflict-ridden industry, and he doesn't feel any particular need to exhibit passion for the theater. "The reporters who get into trouble—the ones who don't write tough enough stories—are the ones who were in love with the theater as young kids, who were lip-synching to 'Hello Dolly' in the rec room when everyone else was out playing softball," he said. "They're the ones who wanted to be playwrights and actors, and they have sort of a gooey-eyed way of looking at the theater."

Jed Bernstein of the League has little patience for that attitude. "I think we would all agree that critics do not have any obligation to like a particular play or a particular musical," he said. "But what about this: Do critics have a responsibility to like theater and to encourage people to go to the theater? My answer is yes."

Some observers outside the business agree that if critics demonstrated more passion for

the subject, it would help enliven theater coverage. "I don't know any sportswriter who ever comes into sportswriting who doesn't love it and, probably, in the back of his mind, who doesn't wish he could be a fullback," said Frank Deford, a well-known essayist on sports. That level of engagement helps draw loyal readers to sports sections, and in turn increases the resources papers devote to them; reporters are given generous amounts of space to investigate even the tiniest minutiae about their local sports teams. And then there's betting. What if producers found a way to allow New Yorkers to wager on how long a troubled Broadway show would stay open, or on who would replace Reba McEntire in "Annie Get Your Gun"? If you could run a point spread every day in the theater section, Deford suggested with a laugh, readership would jump immediately.

Whatever their rooting interests, it's not unusual to hear today's critics complaining about the state of contemporary theater—particularly big-budget theater. "I've reviewed between two and five plays a week for the last nine months, which is quite a lot of theater works, but I think I've only seen about ten things that I can actually call a play, and five things I can actually call a musical," lamented the *Voice's* Michael Feingold.

THE INDUSTRY BITES BACK

From the theater community's point of view, the general sentiment is that the quality of criticism has eroded as well. Theater professionals worry that criticism is increasingly written merely to be scanned for plot and opinion, not read from beginning to end—and certainly not to be treated as literature. Playwright Christopher Cartmill feels that theater professionals now view journalists more as cogs in the advertising and marketing machinery than as participants in a meaningful conversation with artists and audience members. "Whatever relationship that the writer once may have had with the critic," Cartmill said, "has now been usurped

After Sept. 11, *The Times* felt no impulse to treat theater as if it were a wounded stepchild.

There is a lack of passion in much of today's writing on theater, a sense of rote duty.

by the publicist and the producer.”

“One would be hard-pressed to say we’re in a golden age,” Bernstein said. “Criticism is so much less important than it was, now that society has changed. Magazines are less important. Newspapers are less important. They’ve been eclipsed by dozens of other marketing and communications outlets.

“The great critics, the Harold Clurman critics,” he added, “played a crucial role in the development of artists. [A review] wasn’t just a scorecard; it was a teaching thing. I don’t know that we have had anybody in recent history who played that kind of a role.”

Part of the problem is the increasingly hyperbolic prose used by many critics. “*The Times* wants to see its name on a big show. It’s a form of advertising,” John Lahr of *The New Yorker* suggested. “If you say, ‘This is a thoughtful, powerful, affecting play,’ that’s nothing from the point of view of the paper and the production. You have to say, ‘This is an avalanche of hilarity’ or ‘He is the sultan of seismic satire.’ It’s got to alliterate. Language in this culture is so pumped up. It’s on steroids, and so it’s meaningless.” The fact that advertising dwarfs editorial space in most theater sections, including in *The Times*, means that enormous blurbs in the ads often have more visual impact than the reviews from which they’re drawn.

In addition, there is a lack of passion in much of today’s writing on theater, a sense of rote duty. “The thoughtful, diagnostic sort of piece is hard to find a place for,” Bernstein said. “It’s hard to imagine that there’s a huge readership for it.” Rich’s reign at *The New York Times* is cited frequently as the last time theater was perceived truly to matter in print.

For much of his tenure, he was considered the most important of all the critics at *The Times*.

“Frank could hate or adore something with a passion nobody else could summon,” Bernstein recalled. “He thought it was *important* to go to the theater.”

Others long for a return to the days when Rich’s wasn’t the only respected voice. “Certainly, the heyday of criticism in New York, as far as I am concerned, was when Walter Kerr was writing on Sunday, Rich was writing daily, and Mel Gussow was doing radio,” producer Elizabeth McCann said. “You had three very distinct voices. I’d go to an ad meeting, and some poor producer would be sitting in front of a stack of negative notices, and someone would say, ‘Well, why don’t we wait and see what Walter says on Sunday?’” Indeed, Kerr’s Pulitzer Prize was awarded for his Sunday pieces.

Still, the notion of a new Dark Age in theater coverage is far from accurate. While many in the industry miss the singular voices of Rich and some of his renowned predecessors, others have come to appreciate Brantley’s less confrontational style. Still others say nostalgia has clouded our views of past critics. Darnton maintains that the current slate of *Times* critics ranks right up there with Kerr and Rich. “It always looks better in the past,” he said. “I was in Spain for a number of years as a correspondent and they always said, ‘The bullfighting today is not what it once was.’ And then you go back and read articles on bullfighting from the 1930s and 1950s—and they said the same thing then.” ■

¹“Who Goes to Broadway, 1999-2000,” League of American Theatres and Producers, 2001.

THE CRITICS: A ROLL CALL

BACKSTAGE

Weekly trade newspaper (circulation: 29,000)
 Print reviewers (freelance unless noted): Irene Backalenick, Glenda Frank, Victor Gluck, Eric Grode, Dan Isaac, Leonard Jacobs (full-time), Michael Lazan, Karl Levett, Julius Novick, David Rosenberg, David Sheward (full-time), Elias Stimac, Esther Tolhoff, Jeanette Toomer
 Web site reviewers (freelance unless noted): Derek Beres, Andy Buck, Sarika Chawla, Peter Shaugnessy, David Sheward (full-time), Piper Weiss (full-time)

DAILY NEWS

Daily newspaper (circulation: 704,463)
 Full-time theater reviewers: Robert Dominguez, Howard Kissel

NEWSDAY

Daily newspaper (circulation: 575,000)
 Chief theater reviewer: Linda Winer
 Full-time reviewer: Steve Parks
 Freelance reviewer: Gordon Cox

NEW YORK

Weekly magazine (circulation: 438,000)
 Reviewer: John Simon

THE NEW YORKER

Weekly magazine (circulation: 800,000)
 Reviewers: Nancy Franklin, John Lahr

NEW YORK OBSERVER

Weekly newspaper (circulation: 50,000)
 Reviewer: John Heilpern

NEW YORK POST

Daily newspaper (circulation: 443,951)
 Full-time theater reviewers: Clive Barnes, Donald Lyons
 Freelance reviewer: Chip Deffaa

NEW YORK PRESS

Free alternative weekly (circulation: 116,000)
 Reviewer: Mimi Kramer

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Daily newspaper (circulation: 1.1 million)
 Chief theater reviewer: Ben Brantley
 Staff theater reviewers: Margo Jefferson, Bruce Weber
 Other staffers who review theater: Sarah Boxer, D.J.R. Bruckner, Anita Gates, Neil Genzlinger, Wilborn Hampton, Lawrence Van Gelder

THEATERMANIA

Web site (weekly hit count: 250,000)
 Full-time reviewers: Dan Bacalzo, Brooke Pierce, Michael Portantieri, Ben Winters
 Freelance reviewers: David Finkle, Marc Miller, Barbara Siegel, Scott Siegel, Ricky Spears

TIME

National weekly newsmagazine
 (circulation: 4,000,000)
 Theater reviewer: Richard Zoglin

TIME OUT NEW YORK

Weekly local entertainment magazine
 (circulation: 112,000)
 Theater editor and reviewer: Jason Zinoman
 Full-time reviewer: David Cote
 Freelance reviewers: Michael Hogan, Alexis Soloski, Trav S.D., Linda Yablonsky, Webster Younce

VARIETY

Weekly trade magazine with daily component
 (circulation: 36,000)
 Theater editor and full-time reviewer: Charles Isherwood
 Other full-time reviewers: Robert Hofler, Marilyn Stasio

VILLAGE VOICE

Free alternative weekly (circulation: 250,000)
 Chief theater reviewer: Michael Feingold
 Other reviewers: David Finkle, James Hannaham, Charles McNulty, Francine Russo, Alexis Soloski, Alisa Solomon

THEATER COVERAGE IN PRINT MEDIA: AN AUDIT

WHEN IT COMES to the New York print media's coverage of theater, various presumptions abound: 1) *The New York Times* is all that matters. 2) Critics are, on balance, more negative than positive in their assessment of plays. 3) The larger papers write only about Broadway, while the small alternative publications scrape up the off-off-Broadway remains. Research by the NAJP has found those three presumptions to be, to varying degrees, false.

We studied 15 publications during the two-week period beginning Monday, March 26, 2001 and ending Sunday, April 8. For weeklies, we chose cover dates nearest to March 26 and April 2. We counted stories in those publications whose primary subject was theater and whose orientation was on New York theater activity, omitting stories on national or international theater.

New Yorkers have plenty of places to look for theater coverage. In this two-week period between late March and early April 2001—a period that saw no blockbuster openings—the publications we surveyed ran approximately 100,000 words on theater, the rough equivalent of a 300-page hardcover novel. And print media hardly have the last word on theater coverage. Web sites such as Theatermania and CurtainUp and radio and television reviewers and personalities from Rosie O'Donnell to WOR Radio's David Richardson contribute as well.

Not surprisingly, *The New York Times* covers New York theater to a greater extent than any other publication we surveyed. What may be surprising is that *The Times* is not in front by much. The word count of *Newsday* was nearly equal to that of *The Times* during the weeks surveyed, even though 83 percent of *Newsday's* circulation is confined to Long Island, with most of the remainder in Queens. This indicates the suburban audience's sustaining interest in New York theater.

When the *Daily News* and the *Post* are combined with *Newsday*, *The Times's* daily-newspaper share of theater coverage shrinks to just over 40 percent. And not only do *The Times's* competitors spill more ink on theater, they also reach more readers. Because one-third of *The Times's* 1.1 million circulation is beyond the New York metropolitan area, the three other dailies (which do not circulate nationally) combined reach more than twice as many local or regional readers as *The Times*.

Other key findings include:

- In New York's tabloid war, the *Post* comes out ahead in the theater department, running 40 percent more coverage than its chief competitor, the *Daily News*.

- *Time Out* ran more on theater during the weeks surveyed than the *Village Voice*—often regarded as the king of New York alternative-media arts coverage. *Time Out* distinguishes itself by running in its lead slot a weekly, generally favorable feature of roughly 1,000 words, while the *Voice* theater section has no equivalent slot.

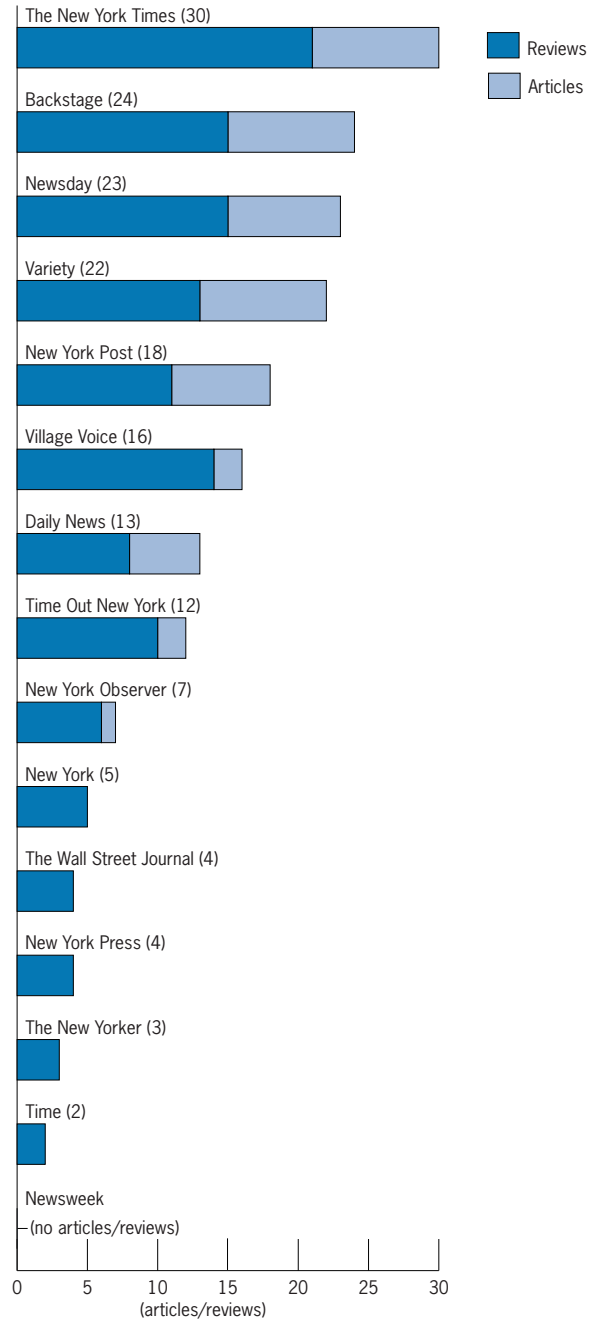
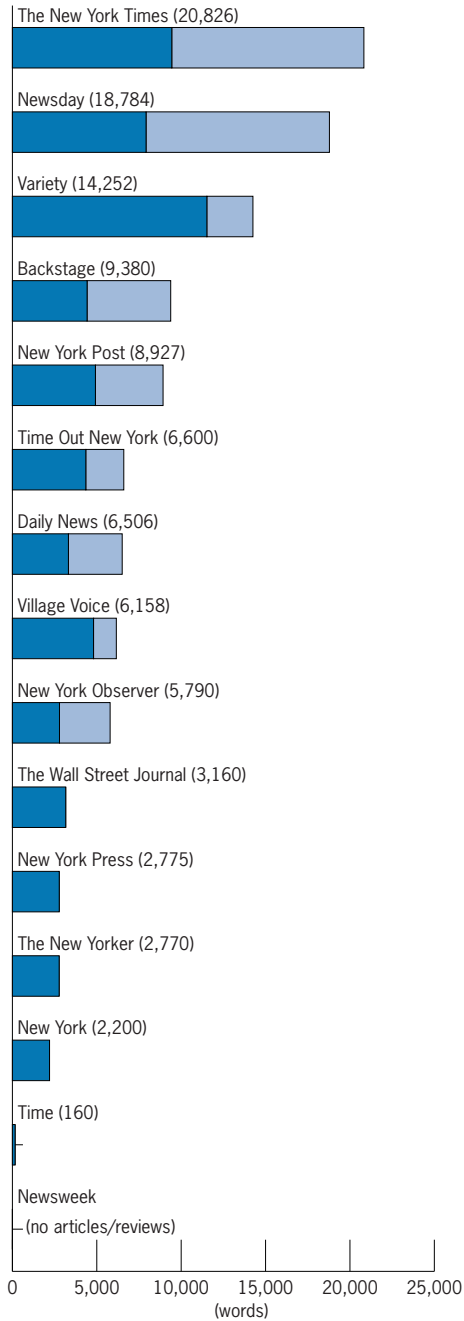
- *Variety* was the king of the “trades,” running roughly 50 percent more on theater than *Backstage*. The two publications cannot be said to be true competitors, though, given their differing focus and the fact that *Variety* is a daily and *Backstage* a weekly.

- The upmarket *New York Observer*—often neglected when arts coverage is considered—ran with the weekly pack. Theater coverage in the conservative weekly *New York Press* was scant compared with its competition on the left, the *Village Voice*.

- Though the dailies' greater publication frequency enabled them to produce more theater copy than the more arts-oriented *Time Out* and *Village Voice*, the weeklies made up for it with extensive listings sections. *Time Out* runs seven to nine pages of show listings, accompanied by 50- to 100-word capsule reviews. The *Village Voice* runs about five tabloid-sized pages of listings with 25- to 75-word reviews.

IT'S NOT JUST THE TIMES

THEATER COVERAGE IN NEW YORK PRINT MEDIA



National Arts Journalism Program, 2002

Notes:

- 1) Word lengths for major newspapers and magazines were checked on the Dow Jones or Lexis-Nexis databases. Word lengths for other publications are best approximations.
- 2) Word counts include all reviews, features and news stories, and do not include theater listings.
- 3) "Reviews" refers not to the number of bylined reviews, but to the number of productions evaluated. Often, more than one show was reviewed under a single heading.
- 4) "Articles" refers to feature and news stories.
- 5) *New Yorker* tallies refer to issues from 3/19 and 4/2; the 3/26 issue could not be located for this survey.

More than
twice as
many plays
received
positive
reviews than
negative
reviews.

•Don't expect to read about theater in the nation's newsweeklies. *Time* ran only two thumbnail reviews in its "Short Takes" section during the period surveyed. *Newsweek* ran nothing at all, though in the issue after the survey weeks, it published a 1,000-word Q&A with lead actors from "The Producers," which would open two weeks later.

REVIEWS

More than twice as many plays received positive reviews than negative reviews during the weeks in question. And the biggest publications were among the most positive. *The New York Times*—along with *Backstage*—was among the most approving of publications we studied.

The vast majority of reviewed plays were off-Broadway plays. This was mainly due to the greater quantity of off-Broadway openings (all Broadway openings of that period were reviewed by most publications). But these figures indicate two possible trends: One, that the media these days have become highly attentive to "alternative" or "serious" off-Broadway theater; and two, major off-Broadway productions increasingly resemble Broadway productions in terms of marketing muscle and savvy in attracting coverage. It remains true that the majority of theater-related features and previews are of Broadway productions.

Certainly, fringe productions still have a hard time attracting reviewers. An off-Broadway review was six times more likely to appear than an off-off-Broadway review, even though roughly the same number of productions were running in each category during the two weeks we analyzed.

Other findings include:

•*New York Times* chief critic Ben Brantley was by far the most prolific reviewer, or at least the one allotted the most space. He wrote seven reviews totaling 8,672 words—more than the combined output of all but four other publications. Other heavy hitters include *Newsday's* Linda Winer and Gordon

Cox, the *New York Post's* Clive Barnes, the *Voice's* Michael Feingold and *Variety's* Robert Hofler and Charles Isherwood. *Newsday's* Blake Green was the most prolific feature writer, churning out 6,700 words of copy.

•*The Times's* Brantley was also one of the most positive critics: Five of his reviews were positive, one was neutral, and just one was negative. *Newsday's* Linda Winer liked five of the six shows she saw. On the other hand, the *Voice's* Michael Feingold was among the crankiest, writing negatively on four of the seven productions he saw and approving of just two. *Time Out's* Jason Zinoman and *New York's* John Simon also wrote more negative than positive reviews.

•Alternative publications tend to be more negative than mainstream ones. Though the survey's composite love/hate ratio was about two to one, the *Voice*, *Time Out* and the *Press* derided nearly as many productions as they lauded.

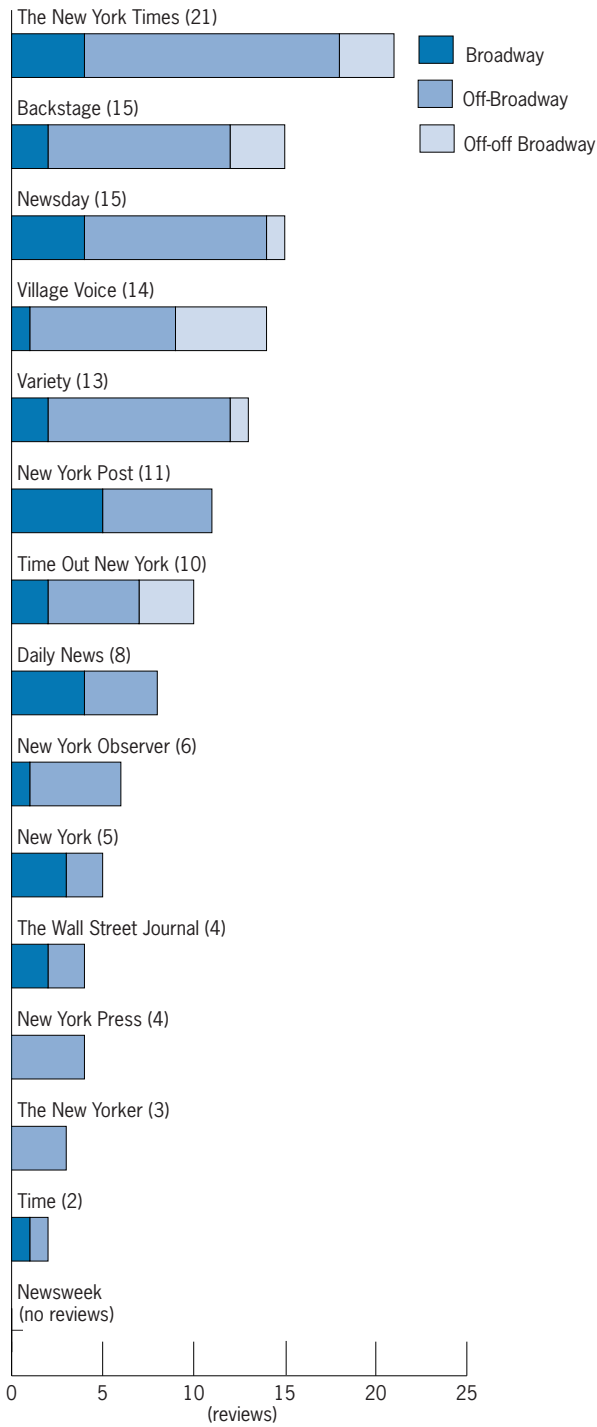
•*Backstage* ran reviews from nine different critics during the period, making it the publication with the most critical diversity. One man's diversity is another man's inconsistency: At *New York* magazine, a single reviewer (John Simon) carried the load.

•The controversial title of one production, "No Niggers, No Jews, No Dogs," dissuaded none of the New York area's four major dailies from reviewing it (the title was named in full in each review, but abbreviated or censored in the headlines). But perhaps it should have: "No Niggers..." and Stephen Sondheim's "Follies" were the only shows of that period to receive four negative reviews.

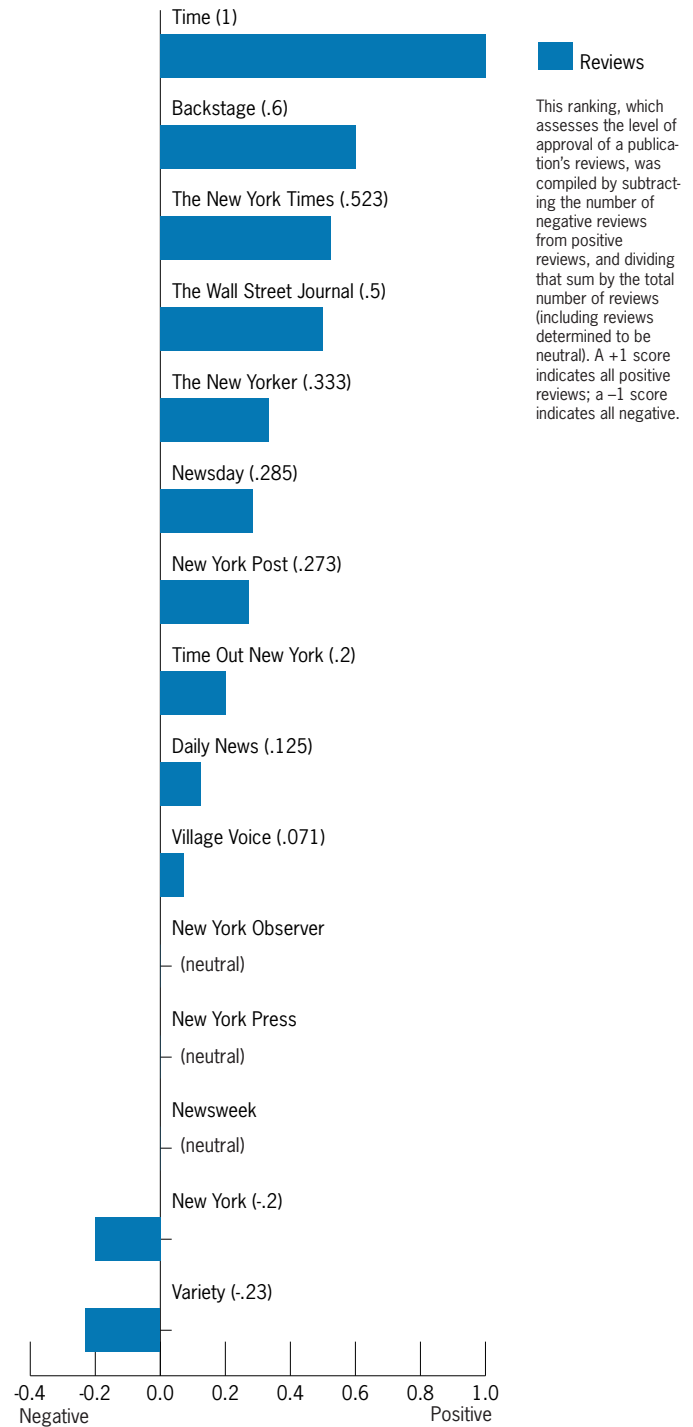
•Mainstream publications did not stick exclusively to mainstream shows. The percentage of *New York Times's* reviews that were of off-off-Broadway shows was roughly in sync with the average. The most mainstream publication in terms of its reviewing profile was the *New York Post*, which, along with appraisals of each new Broadway show, revisited the already-open "Riverdance." ■

CRITICISM BY THE NUMBERS

BROADWAY & OFF-BROADWAY REVIEWS



POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE REVIEWS



This ranking, which assesses the level of approval of a publication's reviews, was compiled by subtracting the number of negative reviews from positive reviews, and dividing that sum by the total number of reviews (including reviews determined to be neutral). A +1 score indicates all positive reviews; a -1 score indicates all negative.

National Arts Journalism Program, 2002

Note: Tonal judgments on reviews are, by nature, subjective, and the plays reviewed during this period may not be representative of that publication's typical critical response.

HOW MUCH PRESS A SHOW CAN EXPECT: FOUR PROFILES

THE BIGGER THE blockbuster, the more extensive the coverage: that much goes without saying. But our examination of specific New York theatrical productions demonstrates the size of the gulf is between the media haves and have-nots. We've analyzed newspaper coverage of four representative productions and interviewed the publicists for each.

BROADWAY MUSICAL ("AIDA")

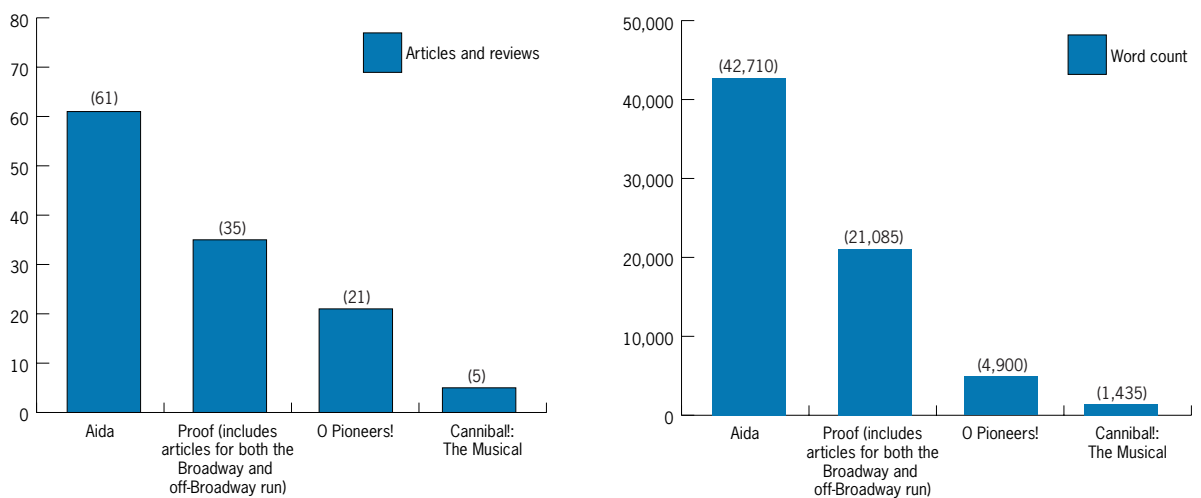
The extensive coverage of "Aida," critical reaction aside, demonstrates the media power of Broadway juggernauts—a power driven more by themes of celebrity and corporate influence than by the shows themselves. "Aida" had several built-in pegs: "The Disney production following 'The Lion King'"; "The long-awaited musical from Elton John"; "What will these hitmakers do to Verdi?"; and, after rough out-of-town runs in Atlanta and Chicago, "Can 'Aida' survive the naysayers?"

More than a month before its March 2000 opening, dozens of articles had been written about "Aida" on subjects including its CD soundtrack, a set snafu in the Chicago production and the fact that John had stormed out of a preview. "If this were just any other musical, you'd have to start six to nine months in advance," said Chris Boneau, head of PR for "Aida." "But sometimes, [the media] choose you."

Negative early reviews, Boneau said, compelled him to concentrate on particular elements in his pitches to reporters and critics. "I felt completely confident talking about ['Aida' lead] Heather [Headley]. I felt confident talking about Elton, and Bob Crowley, who is just a genius in designing sets and costumes.... So I said, 'What are the things I feel I can sell?' One big thing was: 'This is Disney's next musical.'" Ironically enough, thanks to its early problems, the \$15 million musical was able to take on the role of underdog. Headlines such as "Can Disney's Gamble Pay Off?" began to appear.

ALL PRODUCTIONS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

ARTICLES & WORD COUNTS FOR "AIDA," "PROOF," "O PIONEERS!" AND "CANNIBAL!"



Notes:

1) We counted articles and reviews in selected publications for which the show in question was the main subject. We tracked the following publications: *The New York Times*, the *New York Observer*, the *New York Post*, *The New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, *The (Newark) Star-Ledger*, the *Daily News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, *Variety* and *Backstage*. 2) Internet and television coverage, where significant, is alluded to anecdotally in their profiles but not counted in totals. 3) "Aida" and "Proof" counts do not include listings; "O Pioneers!" and "Cannibal!" counts do. 4) For "Aida," coverage beginning 1/1/99 was counted; some coverage preceded this date. 5) For "O Pioneers!," coverage in primary out-of-town newspapers was included, though some of these were too small to be found in databases and therefore remain uncounted in this survey.

National Arts Journalism Program, 2002

Boneau invited media to advance presentations of selected “Aida” scenes, and he tried to dole out story ideas equitably to reporters. “I’m good at saying, ‘Someone else is writing this exact story, so I don’t want you to feel trumped here,’” Boneau said. This paid off in advance features on the show that ran in every New York publication and most news-magazines. To the opening, Boneau invited not only reviewers but gossip columnists, television personalities and celebrities. “When people read about ‘Aida’ and broadcasters and anchors are there, they’re not going to review the show so much as say how the evening went,” Boneau said.

Some did review the show—scathingly. “It’s hardly worth talking about a piece that hasn’t been written or even thought through,” Michael Feingold wrote in the *Village Voice*. A few critics liked “Aida,” most notably Nancy Franklin of *The New Yorker*, but the overall response was such that *Variety* ran an article on the show’s lukewarm critical reception.

Few features followed, save a May *New York Post* piece on the surprisingly low number of Tony nominations for “Aida” (though it did go on to win four of the five awards it was up for), a June *Post* piece crediting the musical’s “extremely shrewd marketing campaign” and ancillary mentions of cast changes and tour news. Despite this, “Aida” sold well and its run continues. Boneau’s work is not done: He has a role in decisions ranging from cast changes to promotions that put the “Aida” girls, Boneau said, “doing a song in Times Square in sexy T-shirts.”

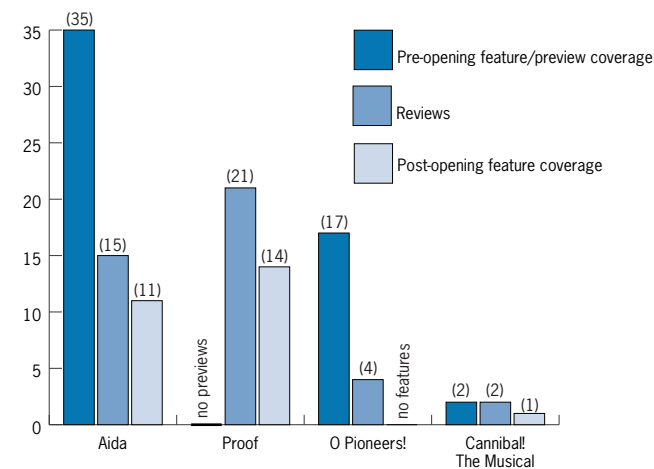
“The idea is to stay on the phone and keep pitching.”

OFF-BROADWAY PLAY GONE BROADWAY (“PROOF”)

Now that “Proof” has jumped successfully to Broadway and captured a Pulitzer Prize, it’s easy to surmise that it had been a media magnet from the start. It starred hot actress Mary-Louise Parker and was written by the up-and-coming playwright David Auburn; it was

SIZE COUNTS

ARTICLE COUNTS AND WHEN THEY RAN



National Arts Journalism Program, 2002

running in an off-Broadway theater (the Manhattan Theatre Club) that had just sent “The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife” to Broadway. But before “Proof” opened at MTC, not a single preview story on the show appeared.

“There was this feeling of a quiet sneaking-in of ‘Proof’ for a few reasons,” said Boneau, who also headed PR for “Proof.” It opened on May 23, 2000, the midst of Tony season, and critics’ attention was elsewhere, he said, adding, “Mary-Louise Parker had just gotten a lot of attention for ‘How I Learned To Drive,’ and a lot of people said, ‘I can’t do a preview on Parker because I just did one.’”

The reviews for “Proof” were stellar; nearly every publication gave the show prominent space, thanks in part to MTC’s reputation. “‘Proof’ a brilliant drama,” went the headline in the *Daily News*; “The performances are perfect... run and get your tickets immediately,” wrote *New York* magazine’s John Simon. Only *The (Newark) Star-Ledger* and *Time Out New York* published less-than-enthusiastic notices. “‘Proof’ became a phenomenon, the kind of show people thought they were discovering,” Boneau said.

To the show’s benefit, most all the reviews ran the day after the opening, which is generally guaranteed for Broadway shows but not off-Broadway ones. “You can pull them all together and have a great ad. Conversely, if

INSIGHTS FROM THE CONFERENCE

“You’d be surprised how often there’s a kind of uniformity among critics, even from different papers in town. Chances are, if we had two critics reviewing the same play and they both panned it, it would be a double blow: A roundhouse to the head and then an uppercut to the jaw.” - *John Darnton, culture editor, The New York Times*

“Any producer who counts on a *New York Times* review should go home. The fact is, people will start talking, and they will decide for themselves who it is they want to see. A bad review has not stopped people from going to see a show.” - *Chris Boneau, partner, Boneau/Bryan-Brown*

the reviews are terrible, you want them all to run on the same day, because you don’t want them to keep trickling out over the course of weeks,” Boneau explained.

After that, “Proof” garnered significant feature coverage, including, in *The New York Times*, a profile of Auburn and a piece comparing “Proof” with science-oriented plays such as “Copenhagen.” Several reviews had compared the two plays, which gave writers a hook but threatened to falsely stereotype a play that addressed higher mathematics but wasn’t really “about” math. “We didn’t push the math-play part so much as the smart-play angle. We actually [unsuccessfully] pushed a Science Times article...but it wasn’t like, ‘Let’s call up *Math Monthly* to push it,’” Boneau said.

When the play moved to Broadway’s Walter Kerr Theater in October 2000, there were few advance features, but there was plenty of favorable buzz in newspapers’ fall arts previews. The play benefited from re-reviews once it made the jump. (*The Times* was alone in not sending a critic to see the play again, though it excerpted from its original rave when “Proof” showed up on Broadway.) The *Star-Ledger* reviewer, on second viewing, found it “a nicely offbeat jigsaw puzzle of a play,” watering down initial criticism of its “surprisingly simple contents.” The play’s move to Broadway was obviously a PR boon, as was the subsequent Pulitzer, which prompted a number of Auburn profiles. The best way to promote coverage of

an unknown but compelling script such as “Proof,” according to Boneau, is simply to get critics to see the play: “It’s your best calling card, your best way to explain it.”

OFF-OFF-BROADWAY SHOW (“CANNIBAL!”)

“Cannibal!,” a Horse Trade Theater production that ran at the 60-seat Kraine Theater on West Fourth Street, is the kind of production that has to scramble for coverage wherever it can. A review is by no means guaranteed, and an independent feature is practically a freak occurrence.

Though you wouldn’t know from the scant coverage it received, “Cannibal!” had pretty good feature hooks. The show was a comic retelling of the story of Alferd Packer, a 19th-century explorer who survived a disastrous excursion by eating his cohorts. It was written by Trey Parker, whose Comedy Central show program “South Park” had recently become a sensation and spawned a feature film. And “Cannibal!” was adapted from a movie that itself had a cult following. This may be why the musical was written about at all.

Even so, “Cannibal!” was reviewed in just two of the publications we surveyed, though it did receive several reviews on Web sites and in smaller publications beyond the reach of this survey.

As it happens, the production was immensely successful and was extended four

times, though no further coverage appeared until Tara Bahrapour wrote a colorful piece for the City section of *The New York Times* focusing on some of the musical's "groupies," who were dressing up as the show's characters, "Rocky Horror"-style. An earlier production by the same theater company at the same theater, "Shelf Life," received less than half the coverage "Cannibal!" garnered.

TOURING PRODUCTION ("O PIONEERS!")

Touring productions such as the Manhattan-based Acting Company's early 2001 adaptation of Willa Cather's "O Pioneers!" are driven by different media imperatives than shows mounted in a single venue. For one thing, Gerry Cornez, communications director for Acting Company said, they don't rely much on reviews because the production generally has left town by the time a review would run.

"O Pioneers!" premiered in January with several performances in Queens. It received just two *Newsday* pieces, one on the company and another previewing the performance, before lighting out on a 16-city tour of suburban, collegiate and small-town venues such as Hampton, Va., Parkersburg, W.Va. and Beatrice, Neb.

In such towns, newspapers often lack theater critics or even dedicated arts writers. "O

Pioneers!" was fortunate to receive a 600-word article in Beatrice's local newspaper (where, among others, the theater's superintendent was quoted) because of Willa Cather's local heritage. But mostly, "O Pioneers!" received short previews that rarely did more than parrot the press release for the production. The Acting Company had to rely heavily on those who would attend based simply on interest in Willa Cather, and on season subscribers who trust the programming taste of the host venue.

Upon returning to New York for a three-week run, "O Pioneers!" received its only reviews, in *The New York Times*, *Backstage* and *Time Out New York*. The notices were not great. *The Times*' Wilborn Hampton found the show middling to problematic, and the *Backstage* review lumped it together with a workshop reading of "O Pioneers!" by another company. Cornez prefers that Acting Company reviews appear later rather than sooner, because they can prop up ticket sales that sag in the middle of a run. "*The Times* always comes to the first performance, but holds the review for a week or so," he said.

"O Pioneers!" was praised by one New York critic: Margo Jefferson of *The Times*, in what may have been an indirect rebuttal to Hampton. Unfortunately for the Acting Company, her piece appeared more than a month after the production had closed. ■