

Anne Peter: “Theatre criticism won’t die out.”

Duška Radosavljević interviews Anne Peter, editor at German theatre publication nachtkritik.de, about how the site's new model of criticism works - and the challenges of supporting high-quality journalism online.



Anne Peter, editor of nachtkritik.de. (C) Thomas Aurin

Online journalism is here to stay. We have been on a sort of a cusp for a while, witnessing debates about the virtues and shortcomings of printed vs. digital theatre criticism for example, but – the funding issue notwithstanding – no one can dispute the fact that online outlets such as Exeunt in the UK, Howlround in the United States and nachtkritik.de in the German-speaking countries do offer more than just the usual staple of reviews, interviews and features. Livestreaming has become a major trump-card of a

digital arts magazine in recent years. Similarly, collectively written arts journalism and criticism has been pioneered by Exeunt, and nachtkritik.de prides itself on creating a space for discussion with their readers.

Sheer enthusiasm and an idealistic belief in the digital commons (prompted perhaps by the paradigm shift away from commercial corporatism and towards open source approach in technology) has kept these outlets going – and growing – in most cases. However, it is not a clean-cut case of generic progress. The field of digital theatre journalism is still deeply embroiled with its print nemesis in many cultures. Sometimes the field overlaps with academia too – in some countries, theatre critics facing the demise of the print media have started to seek refuge in universities, in others, they have always been embedded there. In some cultures theatre criticism has been a powerful tool in the hands of the ruling elite, in others it has been driven by the readers' expectations. Some individuals believe that theatre criticism is a carefully honed craft that only a few can deliver, others that everyone has something valuable to say about their theatre-going and that all responses deserve to be catalogued for future generations.

Over the last couple of years I have been compiling a collection of articles on the subject and it is finally due to be published this month by Methuen. The book brings together a variety of perspectives on the issue – cultural, historical, philosophical and practical. It contains articles by scholars and critics as well as examples of innovative practice. In the process of writing my own introductory essay to the volume I interviewed a number of arts journalists and editors of significant publications whose insights were valuable in forming a more detailed picture of the current (rapidly changing) landscape. Incidentally, due to the nature of the printed medium, we actually ran out of space to include these interviews within the publication, but here is a small glimpse of what the primary research generated.

The interview with Anne Peter, Editor of nachtkritik.de, was originally conducted by Skype in January 2015 and the transcript has been revised and updated for this occasion.

DR: How did nachtkritik.de come about?

AP: nachtkritik.de was founded in 2007 when, with the rise of online journalism, the discussion with and among the readers reached a new dimension. The founders thought that it was important to listen to what the audience had to say about theatre performances and to get into a dialogue with them. That was the main motivation for starting nachtkritik.de: not to have the printed review as the final and unchangeable word on an artwork, but to see criticism more as an opening of a discussion. The user comments have always been central for us.

Of the five original founders only one has left for another job, but the others are still part of the team. They are critics Nikolaus Merck, Dirk Pilz, Esther Slevogt, and the web designer Konrad von Homeyer.

Originally there were four editors, by now we are a group of eleven. I started as an author, became editor in 2008 and editor in chief three years later.

Do the editors have individual spheres of responsibility?

We are working in a very democratic way – we decide a lot of things together, through discussions. In general every editor has to be able to do all different tasks coming with the daily editorial shifts: editing texts, researching news, moderating the user comments section, taking care of our social media channels and of incoming e-mail. We don't have a Social Media Manager or a Community Editor; all eleven of us take it in turns to deal with those duties and thus stay in touch with the readers. But over time we've started to differentiate a little, of course. One is more responsible for new authors and applications, for example; another is more responsible for our international section; another is more responsible for technical aspects; and we have divided up the regions that we cover – which are the different parts of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

You have quite a number of authors listed on the website...

Yes, about 60 authors write for us regularly, from all of the regions, and we try to involve them in the decision-making. We ask them every month what they want to write about and what they think is important in their region because we can't know everything from Berlin where the editorial team works. So we depend very much on the expertise of our writers.

How do you establish what your audience is interested in? Do you have ways of monitoring audience engagement with your work?

We can see how many people click on an article, how many engage in the comments section beneath an article or how many like and share our stuff via social media. All this gives us a better idea about what people want to read. But we try not to be too much influenced by click rates; we try to think first about what we want to offer on our website.

And who are your readers?

Thanks to a survey we know that we have a lot of professional readers. But there are also non-professionals, ordinary theatre-goers or school-level students among them – you can often tell from the reader comments. As a result, I think, we get a much better feeling of our audience than a print critic could. On average we have around 11,000 visits per day. We also know from our statistics that a lot of people return regularly and that they spend quite some time on the site.

Are there any other ways in which you can compare your work and the function of the website to print media?

One advantage of nachtkritik.de is that we are the fastest to provide written criticism. But we also have the opportunity to experiment with forms other than text: to include multimedia material, video, audio, posts from social media or use interactive elements such as playful user polls. For special occasions we are experimenting with dynamic forms like liveblogging or livetweeting. Last summer we collaborated with a festival to livestream Forced Entertainment's "Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare", and we livestreamed some panel discussions via Periscope – all in order to let more people participate. One of our latest innovations is a regular podcast that deals with a currently discussed topic. Concerning multimedia we are still at the beginning, but we are determined to strengthen that aspect of our work too.

Another main advantage, as I said in the beginning, is the type of relationship with the readers. It's simply not the same if you read a paper page that you can't talk back to. Our idea is to start a discussion around the artwork, the performances, and also on issues of cultural policy. I think that's what art needs – to be talked about, to be surrounded by different interpretations and points of view. We gather the voices of readers and also of other critics (with summaries of their articles), and thus hope to create a more complex picture.

And then nachtkritik.de also works as an aggregator that collects and curates all the important news and discourses about theatre in one central place. Aside from the archival function that it has because all articles remain accessible to everybody, for free.

How many reviews do you publish every week?

We publish about 50 a month, so 10-13 a week.

You cover books as well as theatre?

Yes, a selection of books on theatre; but criticism of theatre performances and features on theatre aesthetics and cultural policy form our primary focus. We don't really cover opera or dance or children's theatre, except for special cases that seem particularly interesting for our audience. We would love to cover those too, but we don't have the financial and personnel capacity for it.

Are your reviews longer than the ones in newspapers?

No, when it comes to the actual text we are pretty conservative, I'd say – the length, the form, the quality are more or less the same as in print criticism. But I believe that the awareness of the writer changes if they know someone can speak back to them. We have observed two consequences of the comments section: either people write more freely because they know it's only the first point of a larger discussion, or they write more carefully, they check their arguments better, because they know someone will talk

back, might ask questions or challenge their point of view. So the readers' comments can actually work like a kind of quality control.

Do you have any competition? Are there any similar publications in the German-speaking world?

There are some regional ones, but there is no site that gives this kind of overview and covers as much as we do.

You also publish features and articles.

Yes, and essays on aesthetic trends – the influence of computer games on theatre, for example – pieces about the future of theatre or their more and more precarious financial situation. One important example that was also spurred by the readers' interest is the big debate on diversity, racism and blackface on stage that started in 2012 and got a new impulse with the recent performances that involve refugees.

And what is the proportion between reviews and articles on the website?

Reviews are definitely the core of our site. We have one or two debate articles a month. The news section is important, too. Sometimes writers or theatre-makers offer articles to us. In general we have to decide carefully on what we publish, with regards to content, but also to the monthly budget.

How do you fund your work and the running of the website?

By now advertising covers up to 70 or 80 per cent of the costs. It mostly comes from theatres. There are some donations, some patron contributions and some smaller projects that we do, like special websites for festivals such as the Heidelberger Stückemarkt, that we get money for and help to finance other things, but we still spend more than we earn. Nevertheless: having up to 80 per cent of revenue from advertising after nine years is already really great for us.

Are all of your contributors paid and are you able to tell us how much this payment usually is?

Since the beginning everyone has been paid – the editors and the writers. The payment is €80 for a review. It's rarely enough or appropriate to the amount of work required – if you consider that you usually have to read the play or sometimes even a long novel before you watch a performance and write the review – we know that; but it's comparable to the average payment of a local newspaper. That's a problem faced not just by nachtkritik.de or online journalism, but by print journalism, too.

Is the payment determined by the length of review?

No, everyone gets the same amount of money, whether they decide to write a longer or a shorter piece. If the performance is not too convincing, it can be enough to write a shorter review. And if it needs some more explanation or provokes a more profound analysis, the text can also be longer. On average, we try to stick to 4500 signs.

How do you go about recruiting writers?

By now we get at least one or two applications a month – so there is actually a lot of people who want to write for us and we have to select carefully. In the beginning, one of the founders who had worked as an editor for Theater der Zeit knew a lot of authors from there and recruited them. We also keep an eye on blogs and on young journalists' projects in theatre criticism.

Are these training schemes?

Yes they are. For example there's the Theatertreffen-Festival which maintains a blog (I took part in it when the project was still a newspaper). I know a lot of people from those times and a lot of these people are now working for nachtkritik.de.

Is there a likelihood that the website may develop an English section?

Since the British critic Andrew Haydon writes for us, we have tried some English texts and it has actually worked very well. A lot of people from the UK read us then for the first time. We decided to try more international pieces in English – and not have them translated because that means additional costs – and the few examples seemed to have worked well for our German-speaking readership, too.

What is your personal view on the future of theatre criticism, given the shift from print to online theatre criticism?

The space for theatre criticism in newspapers is diminishing, we see that every day as we summarize the texts of our print colleagues for the website. But generally, I'm not so pessimistic, because we also see that a lot of people are actually interested in reading reviews – profound, thoughtful, analytical reviews by critics – and people want to discuss them. Theatre criticism won't die out, but it will probably change from print to online. That absolutely does not have to be a bad thing – as I said before, online criticism has a lot of advantages. In the future it will be important to get and stay in touch with the readers and to discover the expertise and knowledge that they often contribute. But the crucial question, not only for theatre criticism, but for the whole of journalism is: How can high quality journalism be financed, whether online or offline? We don't have an answer to that, although it seems, we are on a way that works for us, for now.

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