



signposts towards →

writing dance reviews

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In my experience, much time and effort is spent (and often also wasted) talking about the idea of the dance review, and much less on the practice of writing them.

In this very short guide, I wanted to treat the dance review not as an idea but as text – that is, as words which people write, and read.

Think of it not as a routemap towards a fixed destination (‘the dance review’) but as a collection of signposts to follow – or depart from, if you wish – as you find your own ways through the field.

Though it is neither definitive nor complete, I hope that in this way it will prove useful, and stimulating, for new writers as well as experienced ones.

Sanjoy Roy

Editor, Springback Magazine

→ What is a review?

A review is a publication format that developed alongside the public presentation of artworks. There are two keywords in that sentence: artwork and public. The reviewer is an audience member who mediates between the artwork (as opposed to the artist) and another public: the readers. The review must be accessible to people who were not present at or part of the performance itself – otherwise it becomes a closed circle, for insiders only, and publication is pointless.

Publications have different publics: a style magazine, a scholarly journal, a national newspaper and a personal blog have different readerships and expectations. So before you think about the review, think about first whether and then how it can interest the publication’s readers.

A review is, fundamentally, a ‘re-view’ of the performance. The reviewer is an intermediary whose role is to **witness** the performance, **communicate** that experience in a different medium, and **engage** readers who were not there.

Many people think the role of the reviewer is to **evaluate** a performance. In fact it is one role of several, and you will be a better reviewer if you think of it not as the *goal* but as a *consequence* of review writing.

Is it possible to fulfil all those roles at once? Of course not. Accept failure from the start, then. This will leave you freer to focus on what you *can* achieve, and how.



→ Before you begin: context

A performance is not a thing, it is a social event embedded in a wider world. How much of its context, and yours, should you take into account?

It's good to be aware of context – which can be as general as 'culture and society' or as particular as the programme notes – but for the purposes of the review (a *re-view*, remember) **backstory is background**. It is necessary and valuable, but don't get lost in it. Your focus is on the foreground: the material presented to the public.

→ Witnessing

To witness well is not just to see this material but to *notice* it. Give your attention to the performance. Ask yourself: what are its means and materials? What are its effects?

Dance places an emphasis on body movement – and so should you – but there are typically other media in play too (sound, design, light and so on). Notice them too. At this stage, don't worry too much about what they all mean or what you think about them. Instead, open your senses and sensitivities. Be alert and receptive to what is happening, how effects are made and felt. This way, you will be *with* the performance, not just *at* it.

What kinds of things can you notice? Actions and interactions. Gestures, shapes, compositions, energies, sequences. Moods, atmospheres. Imitations, expressions, representations. Space, stillness. Timings and transitions.

The arc and punctuation of phrases. Small details and the big picture. Particular performers. Particular media (movement, music, light and so on), and their interactions. Your own feelings.

There is so much to notice, and you can't (and shouldn't try to) notice it all. But do try to **notice the material of the performance** (what happens, and how) **instead of rushing to find its meaning**. This will help you to illuminate how the performance relates to its effects.

Noticing and note-taking

However attentive you are, you will start forgetting details very quickly. That's one reason to take notes during the performance. Learn how to do this in the dark, by keeping your hand on the page, and making wide linespaces.

Note-taking also helps keep your mind and senses active and alert. And it connects your sensory impressions to the linguistic part of your brain – a useful pathway towards generating words.

Most notes are just memory-joggers. If you happen to think of phrases or ideas that could prove useful later, jot them down too – but don't force it. Now is the time to focus on the present, not to jump ahead.

In short, noticing is an active form of witnessing, and note-taking helps you to channel what you witnessed towards language.



→ Communicating

The review recounts your experience of the performance to the readers. For them to enter your story, you need to communicate in two basic ways.

First, give them the **information** they need. Typically this will include at least the title of the work reviewed, and names of those artists you consider necessary for the reader to know what you're writing about. Information anchors the reader in your story.

Second, give them an **evocation** of the performance – an impression that helps them to picture the performance in their minds and feel it in their senses. Don't make the common mistake of dismissing this as 'mere description'. It is, rather, the foundation without which nothing else can be built, and is often the most creative and engaging part of review writing and reading.

How do you choose what to recount? The two questions to ask are: will this help show what happened, and will it help show how it worked?

You might select something – moment, motif, mood or situation – that is indicative of the piece in general, to give an impression of overall content or style. You might also choose highlights, turning points or resolutions to point to moments of particular significance. These give readers an idea of **what happened**.

Choosing moments that illustrate how the performance material produces its effects – moments that *mean something*

or *do something* – will help not only recount what happened, but illuminate **how it worked** (or failed to work).

Weaving all these together – information and evocation, generalities and particularities, material and effects – will communicate to readers in a way that is accessible and alive. It will also keep your writing connected to the physical world of the performance, and stop it from floating away into ungraspable abstractions.

→ Engaging

Why should anyone be interested in your review? Artists, producers and programmers have their own interests, but you are not writing for them. Maybe you can count on people who are already interested in dance, or in the subject of your review. Maybe your insights are intrinsically interesting. But if the writing itself is boring, the review will be a turn-off. So **make your text a turn-on**.

How? It is a matter of style, and it is just as important as substance.

Think about prose. Prose is written language with the rhythm of spoken language. It need not imitate speech, but good prose can be spoken out loud and still sound natural. This gives it a quality of voice: it 'speaks' to the reader. It has a sense of directness. It is often literal: it means what it says.

Prose also has a sense of direction: words form sequences, sentences move forwards. Good prose helps the reader to go with that flow.



Think about poetry. Poetry mobilises the images and the sounds of language, using composition and connotation. It is often figurative: it means more than it says. Instead of always flowing forward, it can give the reader pause. Dance, being non-verbal in its means and non-literal in its meanings, must often be evoked with poetic language.

Think about drama. There are many ways to tell a good story. All pay attention to beginnings and endings – how the reader enters and exits the story. In between, the reader should be able to imagine the setting, characters and events, and to stay with the world you create in words.

A review is your **story of the dance performance**. It moves between description, narration, interpretation and commentary, using your mix of prose, poetry and drama.

That sounds like a lot, but all this can happen in the space of paragraph, without the reader even noticing. By all means labour to write a review if that's what it takes; just don't make it a labour to read.

Do, though, remember to find pleasure where you can. Otherwise, why write at all?

→ Evaluating

Don't try to form opinions too quickly. Practise witnessing, communicating and engaging, and you will find yourself articulating opinions not just for your readers, but also for yourself. Discernment will come through the questions you ask as you go. Don't ask: how good or bad was this? Rather: how did this work, or not work?

In this way, evaluation becomes not some kind of final scorecard, but emerges from the review process itself in the form of **observation** and **commentary** that fits into the body of the text.

Always remember the difference between *good* and *positive*. A good review is attentive, connects material to effects, interweaves description, interpretation and commentary, and blends style with substance. Artists, presenters and particularly publicists often equate a good review with a merely positive one, but their agenda is not yours – and nor is it your readers'.

→ Begin again

You learn most about how to write dance reviews by writing dance reviews. So practise.

After you've written one, leave it to one side for a while, then read it again with your reviewer's eye. Notice what it does and doesn't do. Link the words to their effects. *Re-view it*. Try reading other writers' reviews in the same way, and see what you learn.

Then the next time you write a review, go back to the beginning, and start again.



Some practical tips

Type up your notes as soon as you can. This will help you record and consolidate your experience before you forget too much. It's also the best time to decipher your scrawl.

Don't leave writing too long after a show. My optimum seems to be: type up notes on the night, write a draft the next day, finalise it the morning after. Sometimes this is not possible, so if your deadline is sooner, meet it. If it's longer, don't delay just because you can. If you don't have a deadline, make one.

Think of writing in two stages. Get the words out first, to create a working draft. Then, revise and refine it.

Writer's block? Start describing something – anything – that happened. Better to get the text going and then revise or even delete it than to stare at a blank page.

Think of writing *to someone*, not just *about something*.

Don't pretend to know more than you do.

Dance lives and moves. Think about how you can give life and movement to your sentences.

After you've written your text, try reading it out loud. You'll be surprised how much this reveals.

You can usually write in fewer words than you think you need. Try it. It will likely clarify your ideas and priorities as well as your writing, and give more breathing room for your readers.

You are an intermediary between artwork and reader, so don't go on about yourself. The point of interest is the art, not you.

Remember that the perfect review – like the perfect artwork, artist, writer or reader – does not exist.

Further reading on writing

Mark Fisher, *How to Write about Theatre: a Manual for Critics, Students and Bloggers* (2015)

Though focused on acting and drama, this remains a very thorough, accessible and practical resource for dance reviewers.

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well: the Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction* (1976)

Zinsser is a wise and wonderfully human writer, and this remains one of the best guides to writing in English, ever. For a brief introduction to his approach, read his advice to writers with non-native English: theamericanscholar.org/writing-english-as-a-second-language

Roy Peter Clark, *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer* (2008)

Punchy, practical – unputdownable! This writer's guide gets straight to the point with sharp tools and excellent exercises.

Joe Moran, *First You Write a Sentence: the Elements of Reading, Writing... and Life* (2018)

You think you're learning how to write sentences, and find yourself learning about life and the world. A book to treasure.



Springback...

Cultivates a growing community of dance writers, journalists and communicators.

Encourages dance commentaries and conversations that are thoughtful in principle, vivid in presentation, accessible in practice and independent in spirit.

Appreciates discourses that are lively, open and enjoyable rather than academic, laborious or insular.

Believes that contemplation, criticism and creativity work better together than apart.

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