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Not Billington, not Zoella, and *Definitely* not a ‘Fangirl’: Social Distinction within Communities of Amateur Theatre Critics

In theatre criticism, the lines between professional and amateur have softened considerably since the turn of the twenty-first century, with much attention – academic and journalistic – given to the impact of amateur theatre criticism on theatre-making and marketing, on newspapers, and on theatre scholarship. So far, however, the voices and perspectives of amateur critics themselves have largely been absent from research. To rectify this absence, this study applies sociological concepts from Pierre Bourdieu and Sarah Thornton to thirty-five interviews undertaken with practising theatre bloggers in the United Kingdom in order to understand their relative positions within three intersecting fields: the field of professional theatre reviewing; the field of online ‘influencing’; and the smaller and more specific field of ‘amateur’ theatre criticism. Here, the study undertaken finds a significant proportion of practitioners using the counterpoint of the ‘fangirl’ – whose practices of appreciation and etiquette are widely disparaged – to advocate for their own purportedly more intellectual and professional approaches to critique.

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IN THEATRE CRITICISM, the lines between professional and amateur have softened considerably since the turn of the twenty-first century. At a time when the number of professional opportunities in mainstream cultural journalism dwindles, and blogs are accessed via the same electronic devices as any ‘newspaper’ content, amateur critics can create new opportunities for themselves online. Some attempt to excel at writing criticism that could fit easily into the legacy media, with a lucky few managing to earn a modest freelance income as a result. Others seek to broaden the working definition of theatre criticism by extending word counts, embedding music and imagery, even adopting the conscious misspellings made popular by meme culture. Meanwhile, conversational theatre critique from podcasters, YouTubers, and TikTokkers can generate income through subscriber or revenue-sharing payment models.

The internet’s disruption of theatre criticism has seeded new forms, methods and economies.

These shifts in practice and power have been usefully examined by a number of theatre academics, most notably including Eleanor Collins, Karen Fricker, Duška Radosavljević, Signy Lynch, and Michelle MacArthur.¹ In 2020, I contributed to this body of work with my book *Theatre Blogging: The Emergence of a Critical Culture*, which sought to celebrate communities of amateur critics and preserve blogposts of significance that were at risk on impermanent digital platforms.² This scholarship of amateur online theatre criticism had highlighted, like much internet scholarship, the impact of intra-community dialogue on the new forms of critique that had emerged on the internet. However, the voices and perspectives of the amateur critics themselves were largely absent from research. I have

sought to address this absence with a sociological study of amateur theatre critics, informed by Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *field*.

Fields of Distinction

Bourdieu defined 'field' as 'a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take'.³ This is a somewhat opaque way of saying that individual social positions are dependent on the push-and-pull of multiple changing relationships with the people around them. Fields might, therefore, be considered social contexts: work, home, a party, an industry conference. The interplay of forces changes as the dominant cultural hierarchies and existing power structures do.

According to Bourdieu, individuals within a field are concerned with either 'conserving or transforming' the structure of that field.⁴ Those who have become leaders are likely to want to conserve the field's status quo, while those who recognize that they inhabit a less powerful position may wish to transform its *doxa* – its 'tacit presuppositions' – in order to help them succeed. Bourdieu claims that 'to exist in a field – a literary field, an artistic field – is to differentiate oneself'.⁵ As we all act as agents within multiple intersecting fields simultaneously, the success of an amateur theatre critic depends not only on which tactics they choose to employ but also on which field of play they perceive to have the most attractive or attainable benefits.

By applying Bourdieu's concepts to interviews that I undertook with thirty-five amateur theatre critics, the multiple ways in which social hierarchies are established both by and within communities of amateur reviewers can be identified. This article thus examines their positions, motivations, and approaches to three fields in particular: the relatively broad field of theatre reviewing, where they have come to be understood as challengers to a professional mainstream; the field of online 'influencing', where they share many of the same practices and platforms as that field's most successful personalities; and the smaller and more specific field of amateur theatre criticism, itself containing a wide range of

critical practices, tastes, styles, platforms, strategies, political opinions, friendship circles, and social media followings. Evidence shows theatre bloggers using all of these categories and features, and more besides, to understand their own position within their field(s). Ultimately, the amateur critics most often cited by my interviewees as a counterpoint to their own practices and approaches are younger women, often characterized as 'fangirls'. Considered by their peers to be the least professional and least intellectual of amateur critics, the subtle denigration of fangirls can be seen as evidence of the perceived threat they pose to the group's collective social position.

About my Interviews

Data is drawn from a series of interviews with practising amateur theatre critics conducted between April 2017 and February 2018. While the task of defining 'amateur' in these contexts can be complex, for the sake of clarity and simplicity I considered all unpaid criticism *amateur* and all paid criticism *professional*, regardless of platform or publication. Parameters were also set about form: while the audio-visual critiques within podcasts and video-blogs are of great interest, their largely spoken format makes their cultures and practices of creation considerably different to the written and self-published blogpost. Similarly, I excluded those who exclusively submitted their amateur reviews to websites run by others, and whose work was therefore subject to top-down house styles and editing processes.

My sample was assembled using links, 'listicles', and 'blog rolls' to develop a comprehensive directory of every independent amateur theatre critic who had posted within the last three months, had explicitly stated that theatre was a regular subject for their blog, and who were currently based in the UK. Of the eighty-four identified, forty-nine had clear email contact information available. All forty-nine were approached to participate in this study. I additionally sought contact details for two further amateur critics whom I considered notable: one whose blog was dedicated to a single West End jukebox musical, featuring multiple reviews of

that same show; and one who had started their theatre blog after having been the lead critic of a major broadsheet newspaper. Then, shortly after my interviews began, a new blogger came to my attention whom I also considered noteworthy as they had chosen to publish anonymously, and so I invited this person too. Including those three late additions, a total of fifty-two amateur theatre critics were approached: two declined, fifteen never replied, and I conducted interviews – either face-to-face or via video calling – with thirty-five.

From my observations of the field, I expected to assemble a group largely representative of the wider population in some ways (age, gender), but much less so in others (race, class), and these expectations were met in some ways but not others. The ages of interviewees ranged from seventeen to over sixty, and all but three were white (with British, Irish, and other European ancestry represented); almost two-thirds were women, a greater proportion than initially anticipated.⁶ Only two disclosed a disability (this question was not directly asked), while twenty-eight of the thirty-five considered themselves some variant of middle-class, including seven who acknowledged that their working-class upbringing had made way for a more traditionally middle-class lifestyle.

Interviewees were asked a series of questions that covered their cultural background and identity, childhood experience of theatre, personal history of online participation, the motivating factors behind their theatre criticism, its economic impact on their lives, and their perceptions of both their own practice and the way it fits into a broader critical landscape and community. Often, our conversation would include discussion of other related topics such as the ethics of reviewing previews, the form and content of specific reviews, and recollected encounters with other critics, bloggers, and theatre-makers.

At the start of every interview, I assured respondents that I would honour any requests to remove their name from any quotations or other data they felt uncomfortable about having publicly attributed to them. While those reading this article with a familiarity of the theatre-blogging landscape may be able to

identify some interviewees from a combination of their quotations and my comments, for the sake of consistency, and in order to honour the wishes of the significant proportion who made ‘anonymous’ comments, the interviewees quoted here will be identified not by name, but by a unique number between 1 and 35.

‘I’m not Michael Billington’

That amateur theatre critics understand their own practice in relation to newspaper criticism is not surprising when it is acknowledged that the latter remains the culturally dominant mode of theatre review in the UK. The amateur theatre critics I spoke to occasionally aligned themselves with the mainstream (‘If you imagine a British newspaper-style review, that’s generally how I write most of the time’; ‘In my opinion, I’m doing no different to what people do for the *New York Times*’), but more frequently they used it as a counterpoint, making it clear that they occupied a different position, reviewing in different ways. Sometimes, this emerged in moments of humility or self-deprecation, and often involved mention of Michael Billington of *The Guardian*, who, at the time, had not yet retired. Blogger 32, for example, when expressing his sense of honour at a major playwright reading his reviews, said, ‘I know more people read it via Twitter, but I have five followers on my blog. He’s under no obligation to read anything I write. I’m not Michael Billington.’ Blogger 14 invoked Billington when considering her own knowledge of the theatrical canon: ‘I wouldn’t say that I could talk about Harold Pinter in the same way that Michael Billington could talk about Harold Pinter.’ Meanwhile, Blogger 23 indicated that he would take great enjoyment in being able to reverse the fortunes of a show that Michael Billington had panned in a review: ‘I would love to, if [he] ruined a show for everyone, to be able to be, like, no, no, no. And it actually to catch on and someone care. That would be really nice.’

That Billington’s name was invoked so regularly by the bloggers was testament to his senior position within the broader critical landscape. The combination of his age, race, gender, and

the profile and influence of the publication he worked for had led to his becoming emblematic of a certain type of critical expertise and of a form of theatre reviewing which elevated the importance of the playwright's text and its relationship to contemporary political issues. (His astonishing longevity, working for *The Guardian* for forty-seven years, undoubtedly also played a part in this.) For some bloggers, this form of reviewing, and the knowledge of theatre history that underpins it, is something to maintain or aspire to, including Blogger 34, who indicated her wish to preserve 'broadsheet length, broadsheet rules'. Others, such as Blogger 22, expressed frustration at the power of the broadsheet press. He explained that 'it's not that you want to obliterate the stuff they already like', but that you want 'Michael Billington and the critical establishment . . . to accept that there are other ways of doing things'.

The implication is that these bloggers seek recognition and validation on a par with the recognition and validation they see the professional critics receiving. Even so, from my pool of interviewees, it was much more common to find an active wish to turn away from the mainstream, preserving the pleasure of their practice, than to get angry at imbalances of power.

Blogger 10 was one of many who emphasized the personal fulfilment she takes from reviewing: 'I'm not a serious critic, by any means. It's fun.' Blogger 5 was adamant that her reviewing is not a serious or aspirational pastime at all: 'I always – and I still do really – just think of it as a hobby. It's still not something that I really think of as professional in any sense.' Blogger 20 was similarly relaxed: 'I don't really see myself as a rival to *The Stage* . . . We're all just doing our own thing, and we're getting whatever we get out of it.' Meanwhile, Blogger 35 explained that while she doesn't have the 'specialist knowledge' that she associates with the mainstream critics, her strength lies in the fact that she is 'someone who's been writing a lot about opera and theatre for a long time'. For these bloggers, 'amateur' is not a slur; it is an indication that their priorities foreground their own enjoyment.

It was certainly the case that the bloggers I interviewed saw potential opportunities at mainstream reviewing platforms very differently to the way they viewed their blog output. Even those who also contributed to paying publications, or who hoped to in the future, recognized that the freedoms they enjoy on their blogs – largely in terms of form, structure, and content – would be lost when writing for mainstream outlets, even those which were based entirely online. 'Your blog is your world,' explained Blogger 35. 'You can do whatever you want, swear, whatever, images, don't give a shit. [By] essentially, like, submitting yourself to a different publication, you're abiding by the rules.'

This has led to much of the theatre-blogging community seeking, as Karen Fricker noted when she studied this burgeoning critical community in 2015, to 'fill perceived gaps in the dialogue about theatre'.⁷ Blogger 12, for example, started her blog (which expanded to feature a pool of contributing critics) because she noticed that those writing in the newspapers did not always reflect her experience or outlook: 'They know exactly what they're talking about. They're incredible. They're amazing. But I felt that there was a lack of young voices like myself out there.'

Blogger 23 put it like this: 'If I'm just reviewing the show that is gonna get reviewed in *The Guardian* and has been reviewed by Lyn Gardner, and she's written a really good review about it that's fairly similar to what I'm gonna write, I'm like, what the fuck is the point of me doing that?' His reviews, in contrast, are written 'for someone who's, like, gone to a traditional format and been dissatisfied'.

This perceived dissatisfaction is often connected to the economic structures of reviewing and their relationship with PR and ticket sales. While those industry relationships are not the focus of this article, they play a key role in establishing the mainstream newspaper-reviewing culture as something troubled and unpleasant in the eyes of the amateurs running their own sites. These economic structures are not invisible to those who read newspapers and watch theatre; good reviews can have a direct impact on a show's economic success and the inverse is true too. Audiences

will use reviews to inform their decisions about which shows to see, so the quantitative rating scales employed by most mainstream reviewing publications (and emulated by many amateur platforms too), and short, positive pull-quotes (or longer sentences edited to be short and positive), are widely used by theatre-marketers to sell tickets. When reviews are primarily used as a consumer guide rather than a place to analyze and interpret, to contribute to a show's legacy, or to document an ephemeral performance for future makers and scholars, there is no need for them to be more than a few paragraphs and a star rating. As a result, these short-form evaluative reviews can develop negative commercial connotations for some bloggers, who like to think of their reviewing practice as more than a simple 'what to see' guide.

In a discussion about terminology with Blogger 26, he explained how he perceived the consumerist implications of the term 'reviewer' as opposed to 'critic':

I don't call myself a critic, but I think of what I write as theatre criticism. I'd sooner call myself a critic than a reviewer because 'reviewer' to me implies I show up on press night to make sure that people come and see the show later in the run. Whereas I dunno. Obviously, I have a relationship to that model of theatre criticism, but I'd hope it was a more oblique one.

Likewise, Blogger 32 chooses not to refer to his blog posts as 'reviews', as that 'sounds like four hundred words with the stars at the top'.

Instead, these bloggers are often exploring different territories, writing longer pieces, and offering personal details from their lives and experiences which contextualize their understanding and appreciation of the show they are discussing. Sometimes these posts will avoid explicit evaluation altogether, and occasionally they might adopt an unusual form or style, such as poetry, or quizzes, or prose that encompasses images, animated gifs, or non-conventional language. The freedom offered by these creative formats can be felt most keenly by those who have recent or concurrent careers as professional theatre critics and arts journalists. Blogger 24, for example, began posting amateur reviews, sometimes in the

voice of characters that he had developed, alongside writing reviews and working as section editor for a mainstream arts listings magazine. While this provided him with 'an outlet for the immediate reviewing', he was keen for his blog 'to have some kind of bigger thinking'. He started to write reviews outside of his day job 'because I wanted to have a place where I could experiment a bit more' in the hope that it would 'open up conversations'.

Blogger 3 has a similar background in professional arts journalism to Blogger 24, developing a successful career as a newspaper journalist and editor before an embrace of long-form theatre blogging led her towards a career working with experimental theatre artists on documentation and dramaturgy. She also recognized that the format expected of newspaper reviews was limiting, and tied to a consumerist model of reviewing that she found distasteful:

Part of my stepping back from a mainstream career is a resistance to that capitalist framework, because I don't think it's possible to work in journalism and not work in capitalism, and that was the massively disheartening thing about [working at a mainstream newspaper]. Just the realization that they are a business, like any other business.

Throughout my interviews, I found amateur critics using the practices of the legacy media as a kind of beacon or navigation point. While some experience anger and frustration when their work is disparaged or considered somehow lowly for sitting outside the mainstream processes of commissioning, editing, or payment, and a small number seek to emulate both the reviewing practices and career trajectories of these critics, a much greater proportion of amateur critics seek to distinguish themselves from this mainstream. They do this either by celebrating the way their identity and perspective differs from that of the derided 'dead white male' critic or by ensuring their reviews do not resemble consumer guide newspaper reviews in form or structure.⁸

Amateur theatre critics do not only position themselves in relation to mainstream critical practice, however, since they also operate in

an online space which is increasingly driven by its own economic structures and forms of evaluation.

'I'm not Zoella'

While theatre audiences regularly discuss and critique the shows they see in conversational contexts, both in person and online, most amateur theatre criticism made for a public readership is still published on blogs. This is an example, however, of the theatre discourse being somewhat behind the curve. Since the growth of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X), much of the online participatory culture once cultivated by blogs (and their comment feeds) has now shifted onto these sites. Indeed, when the early influential theatre blogger David Eldridge announced that he was going to cease posting, he cited Facebook as the space where much of his theatre-related discussions were now taking place.⁹ More visual mediums have also taken off online as bandwidths and connection speeds have improved. The most popular users of the video blogging site YouTube are able to earn significant incomes by allowing advertisements to be attached to their content (according to Forbes estimates, vlogger MrBeast earned \$54 million in 2021),¹⁰ while the fastest-growing social media platform is now the video-based mobile app TikTok, predominantly used by those under thirty years old.¹¹ The primarily visual content of YouTube and Instagram, which reached the landmark figure of 1 billion monthly users in June 2018, make them especially suited to content creators working in fashion, beauty, and travel.¹² Yet, when Brooke Erin Duffy interviewed fifty-five lifestyle influencers between 2013 and 2016, she found that, more than any one topic or genre, these sites celebrate 'the figure of the entrepreneur', leading to a huge investment of 'aspirational labour' from mostly young, mostly female users, which was only very rarely being converted to economic capital.¹³

The theatre bloggers I interviewed recognized this new online mainstream to varying degrees, but those who did generally did so in a humorous way, acknowledging that the size

of their readership or followers, the scope of their influence, and their earning potential were negligible compared to the new online celebrities of YouTube or Instagram. Blogger 22, for example, joked to me that Hugo Boss had never 'got in touch and said "Wear our new collection, be photographed around about town"', as if the thought of such a thing happening were so unlikely as to be laughable. Blogger 15 also demonstrated the different markers of success for theatre bloggers when he told me about a recently posted review that had already received more attention than he was expecting: 'The Bread and Roses Theatre retweeted it and it's got loads of likes. Well, not loads. Seven is a lot in my world at the moment.'

At the time of my interviews, one of the most high-profile of this new generation of internet stars was Zoe Sugg, the YouTuber known as Zoella, who had recently crossed over into mainstream popular consciousness after having appeared on the celebrity version of *The Great British Bake-Off* and a subsequent lucrative book-publishing deal drew attention from the media. Blogger 29 invoked Zoella, following a brief discussion of Google Adwords – a tool that can automatically generate advertising content for your blog or website. When users click these links, micro-payments are generated and paid to the owner of the host site, but the content of these advertisements is not within their control and the design integration remains clunky. Having installed these advertisements on her site, making 'a few pounds a month' from it, Blogger 29 realized that the compromises she was making in terms of her blog's design and her relationship with her readers simply was not worth it: 'Like, if I was earning loads of money, maybe, but the thing is I'm not doing it for the money. Like, I mainly do it because I wanna see the shows, and I mean, I'm not Zoella [laughs], so I just didn't see the point really.'

The attention that theatre bloggers pay to increasing their readers and attracting a greater number of page views – of 'hits' – is often negligible. Few engage in active search engine optimization, recognizing instead that the interest community that forms around theatre is a relatively small one, and especially

for those who choose to write about theatre other than the big commercial West End shows, so it is generally more important to nurture meaningful engagement with a smaller group of regular readers – often from within the theatre blogging community – who can operate as ambassadors. Blogger 29, who, we have already learned, decided to remove paid advertising from her site, cultivates the mutual support of fellow theatre bloggers over wider hits-chasing: ‘I support them. I’ll comment on their stuff and say, y’know, that I’ve watched their YouTube video or read their thing, and vice versa, which is nice.’

This kind of peer support, and the signal-boosting of posts, are directly tied to social media use. While Facebook was the most globally dominant social media platform during the period of my interviews (2.1 billion active monthly users by the end of 2017),¹⁴ and, at that time, Instagram was the fastest growing,¹⁵ almost all of my interviewees stated clearly that Twitter was the primary platform on which their theatre criticism met its readers. This could be explained by the fact that the platform experienced its first surge in growth just as the theatre blogosphere was becoming established in the UK (almost 7 million new users joined the site in the first 4 months of 2009).¹⁶ However, it was Twitter’s format and modes of engagement that, for a long time, made it the ideal platform for open conversation about theatre and theatre criticism in the UK.¹⁷ It did not require users to follow (or be followed by) those with whom they are in dialogue, while its easily searchable subject hashtags meant that users could find discussion about specific shows, or recently updated theatre blogs, extremely easily. Twenty-nine out of my thirty-five interviewees told me that they were regular Twitter users, with twenty-six explaining that it was the first, and often only, avenue for the promotion and dissemination of their blog reviews. Indeed, several, such as Blogger 2, also recognized that *all* their theatre-related conversation on the site was a form of promotion for their blog: ‘Twitter is the main way I promote my blog. So, technically, everything I do on my Twitter, like gaining new followers, is promoting it.’

There remained, however, a resistance to this platform, and to social media more widely, among certain interviewees. Blogger 6 recalled an instance when one of her posts (for a volunteer-run magazine site) was attacked by readers: ‘It just provoked this massive debate on Twitter where a whole range of different playwrights took offence at the way I’d celebrated certain features of playwrights, perhaps in detriment to them. And it wasn’t meant to be like that at all.’ As a result of this exchange, and others like it, Blogger 6 no longer actively posts on Twitter, although this also comes with its own feelings of guilt: ‘I’ve weighed up the positives and negatives and, for lots of different reasons, it’s not kind of worth it for me. But then I always feel bad that I’m not really properly engaging.’ There is the abiding sense from many of my interviewees that the labour of social media participation is a necessary part of the community building and self-promotion required to be a *good* blogger, even if this is considered a necessary evil, rather than anything more personally enriching.

Even for those who actively participate in social media discourse and will make concerted efforts to share and support others’ posts, there remains an evident distaste for the quantitative measurements of success that drive much of the internet’s economics and are provided as standard with most major blogging sites and software. It is possible that many theatre bloggers develop a blasé attitude towards their hits in order to manage stress levels and personal expectations, but, in my interviews, this was rarely suggested. Several interviewees would affirm that reader engagement was not their priority; blogging was for personal fulfilment. Blogger 11 told me that he wrote about theatre primarily to create a repository of personal memories, so ‘the primary audience for the blog was always myself, with the knowledge that other people might be reading it’. Likewise, Blogger 7 explained that ‘it was more what I was getting out of it’, while Blogger 31 stated firmly, ‘I’m writing for me, for no one else.’

Others indicated that it was the nature of their readers, not their quantity, that was most important to them. These interviewees were

keen to emphasize the human relationships at the heart of their blogging practice. Blogger 21, who was the interviewee to tell me that she was 'not bothered about numbers', suggested that what was most important to her was for her blog 'to have more kind of engaged viewers. Like there's a few people who will tweet me or whatever. I think it'd be nice if I can kind of develop in the future a group of people who I know read it and who I know really enjoy it.' This was echoed by Blogger 30, who told me that, 'As much as stats can say "so many people have read this", there's a difference between, like, passively reading and then actively engaging with what I've said.' Meanwhile, Blogger 9 indicated that the readers she values the most are those who are intelligent, and whose work she respects: 'If a blogpost is read by people who are good and know good things and write really well, and then they say that it's good, I'm like, OK, that's way better than a hundred more people read it because Simon Stephens retweeted it.'

In sharing such attitudes to readership and popularity, these interviewees were effectively distancing themselves from the more entrepreneurial, profit-focused influencers whose business model involves using the size of their following to leverage lucrative promotional deals. Seeking large numbers of hits is presented as somehow unsavoury. In contrast, the wish for a theatre review to 'start a conversation' with readers perceived to have a certain standard of ethics or knowledge is presented as the ideal.

Broken Trajectories

Considered in relation to the decline of professional opportunities within the legacy media, this may be evidence of the 'broken trajectories' that Bourdieu had witnessed in mid-twentieth-century France.¹⁸ Noting multiple economic and industrial changes occurring at that time, he and his research team had observed 'a sort of blighted hope or frustrated promise' in members of the bourgeoisie who were finding that their expectations regarding their occupation and social status could not be easily met. Bourdieu gives the example of the sons and

grandsons of engineers for whom engineering jobs were not readily available, or the law graduate who fails to find work as a lawyer so instead takes up community work. Circumstances dictated that each find employment in roles and sectors more commonly occupied by those from lower class fractions. Similarly, many of the theatre bloggers I interviewed (an overwhelming majority of whom were middle-class, and many highly educated)¹⁹ might have once expected to find well-paying and respected work as journalists, but instead have had to look elsewhere.

Not unlike his understanding of the field, and the way actors within conserve or transform its practices and operations, Bourdieu suggests that those who wish to avoid 'downclassing' in this way have two main options available to them: they can seek out alternative professions that more closely match their expectations and qualifications, or they can 'refurbish' the occupations they are able to enter, often attempting to reshape the social perception of such occupations in doing so. Bourdieu notes that those who choose the first option will often seek out new industries still being developed and refined (writing in the twentieth century, he cited television, advertising, and social science; in the early twenty-first century, we might identify the expanding digital industries), while those who decide to 'refurbish' the jobs once occupied by those from lower class fractions can have a significant impact on the division of labour within organizations, with greater status afforded to certain autonomous jobs that were previously capably performed by those with technical, rather than academic, training.²⁰ Bourdieu argued that newcomers to certain roles or industries 'may have an interest in redefining it in such a way that it cannot be occupied by anyone other than the possessors of properties identical to their own'.²¹

It is certainly the case that the supposedly open, accessible practices of the theatre blogosphere are subject to self-policing, with amateur critics often imposing strict judgements of quality upon their peers. This phenomenon has been observed in the study of other communities and subcultures too.

Subcultural Capital

The work of Sarah Thornton, who added another dimension to Bourdieu's scholarship on class hierarchy by studying *subcultural capital* within the early 1990s club and rave scenes, provides a useful framework for understanding complex intra-community hierarchies. Thornton argued that, rather than cultural capital and status, in which higher status was denoted by a preference for 'legitimate' culture (and a 'cultivated naturalness' in the expression of that preference), as Bourdieu sees the issues involved, status in certain musical subcultures was established and demonstrated by affiliation and familiarity with niche scenes, genres, and practices. In these instances, it is the demonstration of distance from a perceived cultural mainstream that helps to denote status within the subculture. Subcultural capital can be understood, therefore, as 'a subspecies of capital operating within less privileged domains'.²² While Thornton observed this in the communities which formed around the arrival of acid house music to the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it can also be seen in cultures and practices of contemporary amateur theatre critics.

In her research, Thornton found multiple instances of clubbers (and those associated with the new club spaces) who explicitly disparaged the television show *Top of the Pops*,²³ record producers Stock, Aitken, and Waterman,²⁴ and the perceived core demographic of local discotheques, where young, single women misogynistically nicknamed 'Sharon and Tracy' were ridiculed for 'dancing round their handbags'.²⁵ These images, Thornton suggested, helped to construct the musical mainstream as an 'imagined community' that was inauthentic, conformist, homogenous, and naff.²⁶ The ravers, meanwhile, established themselves as the opposite: authentic, alternative, radical, and cool.

Thornton also found evidence of multiple social divisions *within* the broader club culture. While the music and fashion of acid house was marketed to a mass global audience, she found that 'the crowds are local, segregated, and subject to distinctions

dependent on the smallest of cultural minutiae'.²⁷ Most noticeably, it was those already marginalized – this time in terms of gender and class – who were most readily disparaged by their peers within the scene. An 'Acid Ted' was used to describe a young, male, working-class raver, while 'Techno Tracys' was derogatory slang for young women ravers, the implication being that they had embraced the acid house lifestyle merely as a fashion statement.²⁸ The fact that the name Tracy was adopted for this – having presumably left her friend Sharon dancing to 'The Locomotion' – can be understood to encompass both gender and class stereotypes, since Tracy was a name most widely used amongst working-class communities. The *us* and *them* social binary that had been established to distinguish this emerging subculture from a disparaged mainstream was being adapted to ensure the continued exclusion of those deemed unworthy. 'Even among youth cultures,' explained Thornton, 'there is a double articulation of the lowly and the feminine: disparaged *other* cultures are characterized as feminine, and girls' cultures are devalued as imitative and passive.'²⁹

While Bourdieu had suggested that agents in a field are all working either to conserve or to transform the inherent practices, approaches, and understandings of that field (its *doxa*), Thornton demonstrated what happens when those who have the least influence in the broader field are in conflict. As the acid house ravers sought to transform the fields of music and club culture, so many theatre bloggers seek to transform the field of theatre criticism. Each theatre blogger who does not wish to conserve the practices of mainstream newspaper criticism (and we may consider the very activity of blogging to be an indication that they wish to transform rather than conserve) hopes to transform the field according to their own practice and priorities. That wish, in turn, means they are acutely aware of threats from within – from those participants or practitioners who inhabit a similar social position as they do, but may disrupt their attempt to influence the field by adopting unethical or unauthentic behaviour.

'I'm not a fangirl'

For the amateur critics who seek to position themselves as 'knowledgeable' or 'professional', the greatest threat to their position within the field is not the traditional legacy media practices I expected them to cite, but the relative excitement and inexperience of the 'fangirl'. 'Fangirl', which is primarily used to describe female fans who might celebrate the object of their fandom with an obsessive or excited demeanour (traditionally characterized by the screaming fans we might see following a boy band on tour), is often used as a derogatory term to diminish or belittle the modes of appreciation favoured by audience members who are already marginalized for reasons of age, class, and/or gender, and who enjoy genres that have traditionally been devalued.³⁰ In my interviews, I heard comment after comment about 'fangirls' (or being 'fangirly') that characterized their behaviour as naive, gauche, and embarrassing. Also notable was how often these behaviours were related to musicals over other forms of theatre.

Blogger 27 told me that she is 'not one of the musical theatre fan types', while Blogger 29 explained that she sometimes has to fight her instincts to respond like a fan: 'I try to tone it down if I'm being the ultimate fangirl, because, sometimes, because I love musical theatre especially, I can be a bit, like, "the best thing in the world!"' This also echoed the feelings of Blogger 8, whose blog is specifically focused on musicals. She revealed that she regretted some of her earliest posts as 'they were much more colloquial and quite fangirly, which I'm quite embarrassed about'. From others, I detected a distinct cynicism about the way fan outputs might generate more attention or responses on social media than reviews. Blogger 35, who covers opera as well as theatre, told me about her particular love of the tenor Jonas Kaufmann, but swiftly assured me that she was not overly fannish in her behaviour towards him: 'I wouldn't say that I fangirl over Jonas Kaufmann, I don't go . . . I haven't even taken a selfie with him, but there are people who go to stage door and just wait, and they take a selfie and then, "Ahhh, 100 likes".'

This mention of an opera star was something of an anomaly. All other interviewees who specifically sought to distinguish themselves from the identity of fangirl had either focused their criticism primarily on musicals or indicated that their interest in theatre started by visiting musicals. Those who prefer these shows – often considered lighter and less worthy than other forms of theatre – make a concerted effort to distance themselves from the habitus of the fangirl because to be excitable, enthusiastic, and adoring is still considered uncritical and thus an improper mode of response. And in the field of amateur theatre criticism, where agents either work to conserve or transform the rules of play, it is those with the lowest quantities of cultural capital (whose taste is closest to what Bourdieu would consider the lower-status, 'popular' forms of art) who work the hardest to align themselves with the established, respected, legitimate modes of appreciation. We can see this most clearly in the cases of Blogger 7 and Blogger 30, who share similar tastes and cultural backgrounds, and are two of the youngest amateur critics interviewed.

At the time of our conversation, Blogger 7 was eighteen years old and had been blogging about theatre since the age of fourteen, having already spent two years writing a more general lifestyle blog. At first, he did not post reviews ('I used to do the production history of shows because I've always been nerdy about things like that'), but soon began to conduct interviews with West End performers and take advantage of free press tickets. He used the word 'musicals' in the title of his blog as he acknowledged that 'at a young age, you do mostly engage with musicals', but tells me that he 'never really liked it', and his own interest in theatre was actually sparked by a book that he was given – a collection of Marlowe plays adapted for children. Blogger 7 felt a little conflicted about his class identity, explaining that his mother grew up very poor, 'on one of the most iconic estates in our local area', but that his upbringing more adequately reflected his father's middle-class roots, despite his parents separating and his childhood being predominantly spent with his working-class mother and her side of the

family. It was when discussing the idea of a theatre-blogging community that Blogger 7 referred to the subsections he perceives to be fangirly:

There are a lot of people that just aren't like me . . . I don't get on well with fangirls or . . . 'Fangirl' is such a weirdly derogative term, but . . . I've never been an obsessive, crazy fan about anything. I've been an . . . 'Intelligent fan' is a bad way to phrase it. An 'educated fan' is maybe a good way of putting it . . . It's a lot of appreciation as opposed to One Direction screaming.

Here, Blogger 7 is clearly aware of the problems associated with enforcing a hierarchy. He does not want to appear judgemental or disparaging of his peers, but he nevertheless upholds several of the negative connotations and imagery associated with fandom, from the 'obsessive, crazy' nature of fans to the 'screaming' that we've long associated with teenage girls idolizing pop stars.³¹ In opposition to this type of fangirly theatre blogger, Blogger 7 indicates that his reviews are more knowledgeable, more contemplative, and more restrained. His is a cerebral (and therefore critical) appreciation of art, rather than a hysterical (and therefore feminized and uncritical) adoration.

It might be possible to see Blogger 7's views of fangirls as an indication of latent sexism, but he was the only male blogger I spoke to who sought to distinguish himself from the fangirls in this way. Every other instance of this came from women, such as Blogger 30, a nineteen-year-old student who, at the time of our interview, had been maintaining her theatre blog for nine months. Blogger 30 identified as working-class and acknowledged that coming from a family on a low income meant that her access to theatre as a child was limited. That said, she did dance classes from the age of four or five right up until sixteen, when her interest shifted towards musicals after a school trip to see *Blood Brothers*. Seeing more theatre since arriving in London to begin university had an impact on her taste, and she reported being interested in a much broader range of theatre as a result. Increasingly aware of the career decisions she needed to make on leaving university, she explained that she had

recently begun to think of her blog as 'a portfolio almost', as she hoped to continue writing about theatre after graduation, perhaps in a marketing or PR context.

Like Blogger 7, Blogger 30 tried to avoid perpetuating a hierarchy within the field of theatre criticism ('I don't want to create a tier of, like, bronze position fangirl, then blogger, then you're a critic'), and she was complimentary about those who demonstrate fannish behaviour ('They're all very lovely; they're doing great work and stuff') but she did reinforce the distinction between her practice and that of the fangirls. When she encounters these bloggers at press nights and other events, she reported that

they come across very, like, 'Oooh, I just really wanna meet the stars and things and it's really lovely and I want to show off that I've got a picture with so-and-so from this show and I wanna act like best friends.' And I find it really cringey. Whereas, when I'm there, I think I come across a lot more professional. Like, I'll talk to them and I'll be lovely, but I won't be like, 'Oh my God, I really loved it!'

Here, Blogger 30 demonstrates her perception of the fangirly bloggers by literally doing an impression of them, sharing what she understands their priorities to be (creating social media content over writing thoughtful criticism, developing personal relationships with performers over critiquing the shows they are in), but also presenting her interpretation of their manner and demeanour by using long sentences with multiple conjunctions, and speaking with breathless excitement. Because Blogger 30 is of a similar age to the fangirl bloggers she describes – and is also interested in many of the same shows as they are – to a casual observer, she may be seen to share their practice. Instead, she gently refutes this assumption, clarifying that her habitus and type of cultural capital differs from the fangirl archetype. While Blogger 7 made the point that his critical expertise set him apart, Blogger 30 is making the point that it is her professional manner that distinguishes her. The responses of both of these bloggers to a fangirl *Other* tells us that what they're really objecting to is not any single taste preference or evaluative judgement, but a certain mode of

appreciation. They, on the other hand, do it the *right* way.

These examples of intra-network dissent and distinction mirror those that have been observed in sociological studies of fan communities. Mark Jancovich's work on cult cinema has suggested that fans of certain artefacts and genres will actively position themselves in opposition to an 'inauthentic Other',³² while Stacy Wolf has found that teenage fans of the musical *Wicked* will attempt to distinguish themselves by being disparaging towards supposed 'bimbo' fans with less knowledge about the show and its stars.³³ In theatre criticism, the persistent negative positioning of 'fangirly' critical practices is happening as the wider community of amateur critics works hard to be taken seriously, creating intellectual analysis and cultural commentary that will be valued and remembered and securing an enhanced social position for amateur critics within an industrial context that can also include artists, celebrities, and high-profile academics. Fangirls, however, are considered bad actors who risk damaging the whole community.

'Are you studying this play for school?'

While Bourdieu was focused on class over other demographics or identity markers, the attitude of some of my younger interviewees (demonstrated by the pride they take in a comparatively sedate, reflective mode of criticism, or in a more mature, professional interpersonal manner at industry events) appears to have greater application in the study of age. Of the five interviewees who sought to position fannish behaviour as a counterpoint to their critical practice, two identified as middle-class, one as working-class, one on the borderline of working- and middle-class, and one (an immigrant from North America) expressed ongoing confusion as regards the British class system – something she felt unable to position herself within accurately. Meanwhile, all but one (Blogger 27, a thirty-five-year-old and the North American mentioned) were under twenty years of age, four of the eight youngest bloggers to take part in my study. Indeed, Blogger 30 was cognizant

of the way the youngest of the UK's amateur theatre critics had to work much harder to be taken seriously: 'I think there's a mistrust of young people, like "Why are you doing this? Why are you getting free tickets? I don't understand, what's your experience? Why have they chosen you?" . . .' This was echoed by Blogger 2, who explained that her having a notebook open in a theatre show was more likely to set her out as a student than a critic: 'Most of the time they're like, "Are you studying this play for school?" And I'm like, "No, I'm reviewing." And they're like, "Ohhh . . ."'

Compared to older reviewers who, audiences and readers might assume, had developed a greater level of theatrical knowledge and expertise, these younger bloggers must fight to establish themselves in a field that has traditionally rewarded those with many years of theatregoing experience, who have developed advanced critical thinking skills and have learned how to communicate their opinions in the form of serious, contemplative analysis. It is no surprise that Blogger 7 initially chose not to include pictures of himself on his blog to avoid being categorized as 'just' a young person. For many young bloggers, there is a significant sense of achievement which comes from developing these skills and learning these modes of expression. Blogger 29, for example, who was twenty years old when interviewed, told me that 'it's great to feel like you really know a lot about something, because I don't know a lot about anything else! I feel knowledgeable and I feel I can talk to people about it and actually know what I'm talking about.' The learning undertaken by theatre bloggers as they develop their practice leads to a sense of self-worth, and to positive reflections on their knowledge and expertise, but this can also see new hierarchies emerge, as some amateur critics begin to look down on those whom they consider less knowledgeable, or whose 'fangirly' behaviours emphasize feeling and social connection over intellectual exploration.

But what of the fangirls themselves? How do they position themselves within the field? Interestingly, although a couple of my interviewees suggested, with some embarrassment,

that they had exhibited fangirlly traits in the past, none of my interviewees explicitly identified themselves as fangirls at the time of my conversation with them.³⁴ There was one interviewee, however, the youngest of everyone I spoke to (seventeen years old at the time), who, despite never using the term to describe herself or others, demonstrated several fangirl characteristics during our conversation. When Blogger 21 was asked about the benefits and rewards of writing a theatre blog, she chose to discuss the excitement she had felt on being invited into the professional theatre world, complete with its proximity to celebrity. Citing the press launch for *An American in Paris*, she said she ‘was like, “This is amazing!” Like, Darcey Bussell wandering around behind you. That was the first time I’d been to London without my parents or without a friend. I went up on my own. I was like, “Wow, this is the best thing ever!” . . .’

Here, Blogger 21 did not fight against her relatively young age (she was fifteen when at the event she discussed) or seek to present herself as a serious, professional critic. Instead, she relished the independence that her blogging had brought her and enjoyed the fact that her reviewing practice, when combined with her age, impressed those who were older and more established in the theatre industry. She spoke of the event as a major rite of passage in her journey to adulthood, adding: ‘I remember people being like, “What?! You’re fifteen?!” And I was, like . . . kind of the feeling of being a little bit smug. It feels like a lot of hard work and then every so often you get to be a bit proud of yourself and you’re like, “Yeah!” . . .’

Conclusion

By applying a selection of sociological concepts developed by Bourdieu and Thornton to interviews conducted with practising amateur theatre critics, it was possible to indicate how this group of practitioners variously understand and identify themselves in relation to their professional counterparts in the legacy media, the entrepreneurial practices of commercially minded social media influencers, and to one another.

While some reportedly seek to emulate established approaches to critique, the majority of amateur theatre critics position themselves outside, or in opposition to, dominant practices. By disassociating themselves from established modes of reviewing, and demonstrating a commitment to new forms, working practices, and approaches to critique, amateur theatre critics most often seek to transform, rather than conserve, their field. This, Bourdieu would attest, is a strategy for securing one’s social position by encouraging the dominant conventions of the field to shift in one’s favour. For most of my interviewees, who understand that a career in professional criticism is both unlikely and economically unsustainable, a successful transformation of this field might mean blog reviews are influential and credible enough to alter the economic fortunes of a show, with bloggers not just identifying trends but *shaping* collective tastes, their views considered legitimate evidence of quality (or, indeed, not).

The internet has made theatre reviewing relatively accessible: anyone with a computer or smartphone and internet connection has the tools they need to publish online – but the field of amateur theatre criticism is divided. Bourdieu showed how closely taste and cultural practices correspond to class. I have shown how undervalued, affective modes of review and appreciation combine with the existing social hierarchies of age and gender to ensure that the young, female ‘fangirls’, who like musicals and are excited to be in proximity to the glitz of the theatre industry, are routinely pushed to the back of the field. The preoccupation of some amateur critics with style and etiquette therefore becomes entangled with ageism and misogyny, and risks undermining the accessibility, collectivity, and horizontalism that the theatre blogosphere was once celebrated for.

Notes and References

1. I cite an indicative contribution from each, although several have contributed multiple key texts. Eleanor Collins, ‘Theatre Reviewing in Post-Consensus Society: Performance, Print, and the Blogosphere’, *Shakespeare*, VI, No. 3 (2010), p. 330–6; Karen Fricker, ‘The Futures of Theatre Criticism’, *Canadian Theatre Review*,

- CLXIII (2015), 49–53; *Theatre Criticism: Changing Landscapes*, ed. Duška Radosavljević (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016); and Signy Lynch and Michelle MacArthur, 'Critical Disengagement: The Epistemic and White Supremacist Violence of Theatre Criticism in Canada and the USA', *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXXIX, No. 1 (February 2023) [NTQ 153], p. 34–49.
2. Megan Vaughan, *Theatre Blogging: The Emergence of a Critical Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020).
 3. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field', in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, ed. Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 29–47 (p. 30).
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
 6. On reflection, my perception may have been skewed by the fact that so many of the previous decade's most celebrated theatre bloggers had been men.
 7. Fricker, 'The Futures of Theatre Criticism', p. 49.
 8. In May 2007, during an interview with *The Times*, the then Artistic Director of the National Theatre, Nicholas Hytner, attributed the 'dead white males' label to the broadsheet critics of the era. Hytner asserted that experimental women directors were treated less sympathetically by newspaper critics than their male counterparts, implying not only that the critics were out of touch with the evolving tastes of audiences, but that their reviews were misogynist: see Ben Hoyle, 'Dead white men in the critic's chair scorning work of women directors', *The Times*, 14 May 2007, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dead-white-men-in-the-critics-chair-scorning-work-of-women-directors-6jn7025295h>>.
 9. David Eldridge, 'So long', *One Writer and his Dog* blogpost archive (13 Apr 2008), shared via email message to the author, 23 January 2017.
 10. Abram Brown and Abigail Freeman, 'The Highest-Paid YouTube Stars: MrBeast, Jake Paul And Markiplier Score Massive Paydays', *Forbes*, 14 January 2022, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/abrambrown/2022/01/14/the-highest-paid-youtube-stars-mrbeast-jake-paul-and-markiplier-score-massive-paydays/?sh=6ac189d31aa7>>.
 11. Werner Geyser, 'The Incredible Rise of TikTok', *Influencer Marketing Hub*, 14 July 2022, <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-growth/>>.
 12. Matt G. Southern, 'Instagram Has 1 Billion Monthly Users, Now The Fast Growing Social Network', *Search Engine Journal*, 21 June 2018, <<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/instagram-1-billion-monthly-users-now-fastest-growing-social-network>>.
 13. Brooke Erin Duffy, (*Not*) *Getting Paid To Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 2.
 14. *Statista.com*, 'Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 3rd quarter 2023 (in millions)', <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide>>.
 15. Southern, 'Instagram Has 1 Billion Monthly Users'.
 16. *MarketingProfs*, 'Twitter Growth Slows, User Base Younger', 22 February 2010, <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/charts/2010/3428/twitter-growth-slows-user-base-younger>>.
 17. Active users of Twitter have reduced in recent years, most notably since it was taken over in October 2022 by the founder of Tesla, Elon Musk, who made a number of swift changes to the platform and its staff structure (Dan Milmo, 'Is the bird really freed? A look back at six months of Musk's Twitter reign', *Guardian*, 16 April 2023, <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/apr/16/elon-musk-twitter-takeover-six-months>>).
 18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 146.
 19. As reported earlier, twenty-eight of my thirty-five interviewees self-identified as middle-class. While educational level was not directly asked, at least six revealed a postgraduate qualification to me, included two with PhDs. The topic often came up during pre-questioning small talk since the interviews were being undertaken as part of my own PhD research.
 20. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 146–7.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
 22. Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 11.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 123–6.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 126–7.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
 26. This concept was first identified in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), which considered the importance of a shared culture and media to the creation of national identity.
 27. Thornton, *Club Cultures*, p. 99.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
 30. As revealed by the materials collected in Judy and Fred Vermorel's collection of twentieth-century fan testimony, *Starlust: The Secret Fantasies of Fans* (London: Comet, 1985).
 31. This blogger references One Direction, but in previous decades he might have chosen Sinatra, the Beatles, the Bay City Rollers, Bros – there are many who have inspired similar reactions.
 32. Mark Jancovich, 'Cult Fictions: Cult Movies, Subcultural Capital, and the Production of Cultural Distinctions', *Cultural Studies*, XVI, No. 2 (2002), p. 306–22.
 33. Stacy Wolf, *Changed For Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 232.
 34. While several of my respondents described themselves as a 'theatre fan' or a 'fan' of a certain playwright, company, or performer in an off-hand, conversational fashion, none explicitly identified with the fangirl or the fannish behaviours that term has come to signify.