

# The Critic as Thinker



Stanley Kauffmann

In 1946 **Eric Bentley** published his seminal work, *The Playwright as Thinker*, which forged a new standard for the way critics and scholars understood and wrote about the theatre. Bentley went on to distinguish himself as a playwright and as one of the foremost theatre critics of the latter half of the 20th century. In the environment of renewed intellectual rigor Bentley helped to establish, **Robert Brustein** and **Stanley Kauffmann** emerged in their own right as two of the most influential educators and commentators of the American theatre. In 1966 Mr. Brustein became Dean at the Yale School of Drama, where he established and directed the Yale Repertory Theatre. He later served as Professor of English at Harvard and founded the American Repertory Theatre. Mr. Kauffmann, former theatre critic for *The New York Times* and *The New Republic* (where he remains a long-time film critic), went on to publish several collections of criticism, and teach the subject at Yale.

From the moment Center Director Francis Levy introduced these three titans of the American theatre, acknowledging two of them as his former professors, a buzz of excitement prevailed for the roundtable *The Critic as Thinker*, held on Saturday, October 27. The panelists offered not only a wealth of historical perspective, anecdotal impressions, and humor, they infused the discussion with the unique rapport of colleagues, and sometime competitors, whose careers intertwined and overlapped. **Roger Copeland**, Professor of Theatre and Dance at Oberlin College, moderated the event, setting the fuse to strands of conversation, then stepping aside for the combustion of insight and commentary produced by the panelists.

Touching on *The Playwright as Thinker*, Professor Copeland remarked that no other book did so much to create a climate in which theatre could thrive. Brustein expressed his gratitude for the book, observing that before its publication, critics were trained to talk about the acting, the sets, and the directing, but never about the play itself and its intellectual content. Kauffmann acknowledged that Bentley's book was an inspiration to him because it demonstrated that complaints about the theatre were important to the medium's vitality. Kauffmann joked that he was humiliated to discover that many of what he took to be his own ideas had in fact originated years earlier in Bentley's work.

Bentley spoke at length about the prevailing environment in the theater at the time he wrote his controversial book. "I've always loathed Broadway," he commented, "not just on Marxist grounds,

but on the grounds that it's pretentious middlebrow culture." He went on to discuss his thoughts on Eugene O'Neill, who he conceded would later prove a more profound playwright than he had originally thought. However, taking the example of *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a play that attempts to portray the Civil War, he explained that from a historian's perspective "it's not serious, it's just a backdrop for a composer of melodrama." Though Bentley appreciated the depth of feeling in O'Neill's autobiographical dramas, he didn't believe that he was effective as a thinker. "Aren't you saying," interjected Brustein, "that he was better when he wasn't thinking?"

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The critics went on to debate the merits of the current cultural climate, with Kauffmann bemoaning the lack of perceptible direction in the theater. "When we talk about reforming this or that in the theater," he complained, "I don't know what we're reforming it toward!" But Brustein defended the primacy of the contemporary thinking playwright, citing David Mamet, Adam Rapp, and Paula Vogel. "We have about 35 really fine playwrights," he affirmed. Brustein, who in his career managed to create the very theater he yearned for in his criticism, made the important distinction that the theaters created to nurture the "playwright as thinker" were no longer being supported. "It's not that there are no playwrights in this country. They just don't have a place to have their plays produced."

Concerns about the state of the American theatre kindled a dialogue with the audience, many of whom complained that it had become more and more difficult to attend plays, in part because of the expense, but also because the culture of critical writing that once guided their tastes had declined. Earlier in the evening, Kauffmann succinctly addressed the common lament that great theater (and great criticism) was a thing of the past. "If you look at an anthology of great plays from the Greeks to today, you think, 'My God, what a panorama of achievement!' Then you look at the dates, and you see that hundreds of years elapsed between one play and the next. Sometimes you have the bad luck to be caught between." *A.L.*

## Beyond the Haunting Melody

On Tuesday, November 20, the Philoctetes Center inaugurated its series of music courses, conceived and conducted by **Stephanie Chase**, Artistic Director of the Music of the Spheres Society. The event, entitled *Beyond the Haunting Melody*, featured guest artist **Edward Applebaum**, a composer of contemporary classical music. Mr. Applebaum began the evening by explaining his own creative process from a psychoanalytic point of view. His insights about creativity were based in part on ideas explored in Theodore Reik's book, *The Haunting Melody*, which addresses the life and music of Gustav Mahler, focusing in particular on Mahler's Symphony No. 2. Dr. Applebaum presented excerpts of Mahler's music, examining the connections among the composer's orchestral works. Ms. Chase, a violinist, played two of Applebaum's compositions, "Landscape of Dreams" and "Dirt Music," which he created specifically for Chase. The interplay between psychoanalytic theory and live music generated a dynamic that typified the Center's endeavor to bridge art and intellectual analysis. *A.L.*