

*Mike Youds*

# THE NAKED CRITIC: REVIEWING THE SMALL-CITY STAGE

*Mike Youds is a long-time dramatic critic for The Kamloops News.*

In the category of obscure occupations, small city theatre critic sounds in league with lighthouse keeper, scat counter and rutabaga blight control. The guy must have a hobby to fill time between shows. After all, how could a population the size of a small metropolitan municipality support a professional stage of sufficient scale to warrant such attention?

Even in cities of under 100,000 people that have one or more theatre companies, newsrooms don't necessarily have the resources or the desire to routinely cover local arts. There is a general tendency in news media to view the arts as mere entertainment, peripheral to culture and current affairs. Hard news is the priority. Readers don't pick up the newspaper to see who's playing King Lear, or so the thinking goes.

As a result, entertainment pages in small cities are often dominated by wire service copy generated elsewhere, much of it, sadly, feeding off the cult of celebrity and mass-media interest. This is a shame, not only for readers, but for newspapers as a whole as they struggle for relevance amid the universal trend of steadily declining readership.

Kamloops, by virtue of its location and history, is somewhat different. A lively and diverse stage thrives here, including several professional and semi-professional theatre companies in the region. There has been consistently strong institutional support in performing and visual arts.

Over the past eight years I've been fortunate to mine an unusually rich vein of theatre that runs through the region. Along with Western Canada Theatre's mainstage and black-box shows, there is Project X Theatre Productions with its midsummer Shakespearean festival and winter shows, Actors Workshop Theatre at Thompson Rivers University, and Caravan Farm Theatre near Armstrong. On a community or amateur level we have the Kamloops Players, who marked their 40th anniversary last year. The school-based Performing Arts Westsyde has nurtured young talent over the past twenty-five years. Local theatre grew out of school drama and still draws upon that connection for renewal.

The Small Cities Project undertaken by the Community University Research Alliance has explored this success in great detail, so I won't belabour the point. Suffice it to say that *The Kamloops Daily News* sees that cultural strength as worthy of coverage and therefore dedicates significant resources to it, but this is not a full-time job. Theatre criticism is only a small part of the arts and entertainment beat, and the beat itself is only one of several for which I am responsible. In this context the small-city reporter has to be an advocate for arts coverage, defending it as an important component of a general-interest medium, and juggling demands.

These constraints aside, I think there is a good case to be made for drama criticism in a small-city context. First of all, on the most practical level, a review can provide a service to readers that is not available elsewhere. Is a show worth attending? A theatre review is a public barometer, not only for stage productions specifically, but for the content and meaning of artistic expression generally. Other media promote and preview local productions, but the press has the twin advantages of depth and tradition as a source of critical perspectives.

In a sense, a newspaper is not unlike the stage, an institution looked upon as a reflection of identity and a forum for ideas. They both embody a variety of associations that underlie a sense of community.

Covering the arts beat for the past several years, I've had a chance to query touring professional artists about their perceptions on performance. Several have indicated they savour audiences outside of major urban centres because they feel a stronger appreciation. Audiences in smaller centres don't have the same access or exposure to live performance as their urban cousins. This tends to reward the visiting performer with receptions of greater warmth and enthusiasm.

The same factor applies in the critical response to performance. As much as they crave, support and celebrate local artistic expression, the theatre-going public likes to see that outpouring documented and validated. They feel, and I wholeheartedly agree, that the local professional stage is not only deserving of media attention but just as capable as its urban counterpart of withstanding the critical scrutiny. Readers are often eager to share their own observations. The stakeholder factor — the sense of ownership that residents have in their community — partly explains this feeling.

One of the strengths of theatre in Kamloops is that its various components are part of an organic whole rather than existing in isolation. A great deal is invested by the community in each production, especially professional ones. Western Canada Theatre did not land here from an urban planet. The company developed along a path blazed in the 1960s, and the roots of its community support can be traced back even further to the Kamloops Festival of the Performing Arts, founded 75 years ago. Volunteering and community support have become an inherited, family tradition in some cases, regimented personal habit in others. This custom, a source of considerable enrichment, extends into other aspects of community as well.

A casual observer might assume that the small-city critic can't be as caustic as his big-city counterparts. Metropolitan stage reviewers can rank among the harshest of media critics, respected and reviled for their opinions. There is a lively and longstanding tradition behind this.

Acerbic criticism has its place, but there is a considerable difference between honest commentary and a hatchet job. Research, balance and fairness, fundamental to the practice of journalism on news pages, are no less important on the arts pages. Subscribers demand and deserve frankness. Readers appreciate a forthright approach.

Admittedly, I was green when I started this beat. I'd dabbled in theatre criticism over the years and supported theatre in various communities, but had much to learn. As I discovered, there is no cloak of anonymity for the critic in the small city. The connection with readers and community in general is more direct. You live by and with your views, which can be both reassuring and discomfiting at the same time. It is reassuring to know that you are read; unsettling because the responsibility cannot be taken lightly.

Not long after I'd started, I was having a conversation with a local patron of the arts. Explaining my perspective, I suggested I'd probably not judge a locally-based production, even one by a professional company such as Western Canada Theatre, with the same critical eye as I might view larger, metropolitan

productions.

“Well,” she said, “I don’t think David Ross (the company’s artistic director) would want to hear that.”

I later learned that she was a long-serving member of the company’s board of trustees and a fervent supporter of the arts in general. That support had community pride written all over it to the degree that she didn’t think small-city shows and local productions should be thought of as in any way lesser than or inferior to big-city ones.

She was right. Spurred on by her remark, I sharpened my pencil and became much more conscious of the need for criticism in a constructive sense. True, the scale and optics might differ, but that didn’t mean professional work should be any less subject to critical analysis in the small city.

I now tend to view criticism in the broadest possible terms, not only in the tradition of a saucy and provocative press but also in the literary sense as a medium for illuminating, interpreting and understanding thought and expression.

Through the exposure criticism can offer, the writer also serves to bring art to a wider audience. That is an important function in the sense that Canadians don’t tend to think of arts and culture residing outside major centres. This is understandable. The impression many people have of the outlying regions of this country — anywhere much beyond 100 kilometres north of the U.S. border, that is — is the one they get from the highway.

Small cities are not exempt. Canadians know that culture exists here, sandwiched just off the tarmac somewhere between the Tim Hortons and the bowling alley, if one survives. They imagine that culture to be tied more to the past than the present, and, unlike metropolis, without a clear hold on the future.

Professional theatre contradicts that misconception, helping to explain why it is a vital and valued part of the small city’s cultural milieu.