



University of Essex

Lakeside Theatre

# YOUNG REVIEWERS PACK

**A resource for college  
and sixth-form students**

**LAKESIDE  
THEATRE**

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## About these resources

At the University of Essex we want to invest in *you* - the next generation of students – and to help prepare you for future university study. You may soon be thinking about applying to universities, and so we want to introduce you to university life, and give you a head start in terms of experience, as well as the chance to try new things. We believe a person's potential is not simply defined by grades or background but by an attitude of mind: a willingness to question, to collaborate and to push at the frontiers of knowledge.

We hope that these resources will help you to develop your critical skills, and get you thinking at a more in-depth level about the subject in hand, and about studying at university in general. We would like to invite you onto our campus to share what we do, hoping to inspire you to take the leap and work hard for what you love.

## About the authors

This resource pack has been specially designed by the university's Arts Education team, in collaboration with Jonathan Baker – head of the Journalism Department.

The Arts Education team encourage people to be bold and inquisitive about the world, no matter what you're interested in. We ignite imaginations and challenge expectations through our ground-breaking projects for all learners. Schools in and around the Colchester region can access our program.

Find out more by contacting

**E** [artsed@essex.ac.uk](mailto:artsed@essex.ac.uk)

**T** 01206 873889

[www.essex.ac.uk/outreach](http://www.essex.ac.uk/outreach)

Journalism is a relatively new area of study and research at Essex. In a connected world in which we all have instant access to whatever news we want, professional and trustworthy journalism is more important than ever. At Essex we equip students with the story-getting and story-telling skills to flourish in today's multimedia environment.

Find out more about degrees in Journalism offered by the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex, by going to:

<https://www.essex.ac.uk/lifts/journalism/>

# WELCOME YOUNG REVIEWER!

Thank you for taking part in our young reviewer programme. We hope that you enjoy your complimentary show at the Lakeside Theatre and that it will set you on your way towards many successful reviews.

**Don't worry** - we understand that you may not have written a theatre review before. The purpose of this booklet is to help you get started. It includes examples, handy tips and guidelines for writing your own review. Once your review is complete, it will be looked over by one of our experts, who will provide you with brief feedback for you to think about when you set about your next review.

First, have a look at the Lakeside Theatre's brochure to see what show you might like to review. You're not restricted to one, if a number of productions catch your eye. Check out what's coming up at Lakeside Theatre at [www.lakesidetheatre.org.uk/whats-on](http://www.lakesidetheatre.org.uk/whats-on)

If you have any queries, or wish to confirm any details, please contact the Arts Education team:

**T** 01206 873889

**E** [artsed@essex.ac.uk](mailto:artsed@essex.ac.uk)

This is the email you will use to submit your final review.

## HAVE FUN!!

### Before you start:

#### Here are some useful tips about preparation

- Do some **research** about the show and company you are going to see, beforehand, so that you have an idea of what to expect.
- Be **honest** and **voice your own opinion**
- Do it in **your own style**. This is not an essay, but more a conversation about art, and your **personal response** to the piece, so it's fine to use colloquialisms and informal language
- The best word to remember when watching the show is **'why'**. Why do I like this show – or dislike it? What are they doing that makes me respond in this way? He is wearing a mask, *why*? What does the mask add to the show or represent? She is a good actor, *why*? What skills is she showing?
- Keep it **concise**. Reviews are not usually very long - but yours might help someone decide whether or not to go and see the show!
- Don't forget to take your **guidelines sheet, and a pen and notebook**
- After the show, write the review as soon as you can so that it is **fresh in your mind**. It can then be sent off in an email, to [artsed@essex.ac.uk](mailto:artsed@essex.ac.uk)

# GUIDELINES

Here is a breakdown of some of the things you should consider including in your theatre review. You won't have room to touch on all of them – part of the art of reviewing, and journalism in general, is deciding what to leave out, as well as what to put in. Be guided by what you think are the most striking and interesting features of the production.

## 1. Introduction/background to the visit

You will always want to tell your reader **what show** you saw, what **company** put the production on, and **where** and **when** you saw it. What was the **theatre** like - its **size** and **décor**, its **audience/actor arrangements**, and how did that influence the presentation? **What kind of play** was it - drama, comedy, modern, costume, Shakespeare history play, farce?

What were you expecting beforehand? How did that compare with the experience you had.

## 2. The text and its interpretation

What was the language of the play like - was it heightened, or naturalistic? Was the dialogue convincing? What did you think of the play's story? Did it have a satisfying ending? What themes was the play exploring? Were there any **connections** with other plays you know or have seen? What kind of **dramatic devices** did the playwright use? Do you feel for the **characters**?

Did you agree with the **director's focal points**? The director is the person who, in the end, is responsible for what you see on stage. What **meanings** from this play were **emphasised** through **choices** in the production you saw? How did the **design, staging, and character and acting style choices draw attention** to these? Were these choices successful in creating the **impact on the audience** you thought the director and creative team **intended**?

## 3. Staging – movement, set, props, costume and tech

Was the set **interesting** and/or **attractive** as well as **meaningful**? Was there an **interesting** and **varied** use of **stage space**? Was the **focus** generally where it should have been? How were **scene/set changes, exits** and **entrances** handled? How were the **playing areas** constructed? Perhaps there were **patterns of movement** used **symbolically**? (Consider for both the **individual characters** and for the **cast** as a whole). Did the **movement flow**? What did you think about the **pace** of the production?

Did the **theatre itself and the playing area suit the production**? **Why or why not**? What kind of **set** was it? What was the **style** like? (e.g. symbolist, naturalistic, historic or absurdist influences.) What was their use of **shapes**? Were there **symbolic statements** made by specific parts, including **props**? **How** were the play's **meanings conveyed** through these?

**Description of sound**, including its **source** (e.g. live or recorded, on or offstage, integral to text or a directorial choice); **mood** or **atmosphere** created; **circumstances created** (e.g. dawn with sound of birds and rising sun.)  
Description of **lighting**, including **sources, colours** and **intensity**. How are the sound and lighting used to convey the play's **meaning**?

What were the **costumes** like, were they from a **historical period**? Or perhaps **representative** of a social class order? How were the **colours, movement** and **textures**? How do these choices help us **understand individual characters**, their **relationships** to each other and the **play's meanings**?

## 4. Acting as interpretation

What was the **style**? (e.g. broadly farcical, naturalistic?) Were there any **special conventions**? (e.g. masks, audience interaction, physicalised performing) Was the **style** of acting **appropriate** to the kind of play and style of production? **Why or why not**? Did any of the performers hold special **vocal** or **physical qualities** (incl. accents, dialects, fight scenes, music?) Reflect on the **strengths** and **weaknesses** of **individual actors** within these parameters. Identify and criticise their ability to **connect** with and move the audience at the intended moments. Which performances did you **particularly admire**? Be very specific in saying **why**.

## 5. Impact on audience

Discuss the **impact** of this production on you as a member of the audience and **compare your response to others** in the audience (e.g. were they amused where you weren't?); summarise **the reasons for your feelings**, referring to your discussion of the **acting, directing, design elements** and the **text** itself. You might conclude by considering how your **appreciation** of the theatre was **developed** and what you have **learnt** through coming to see this production.

## 6. Conclusion

An opportunity to summarise the key points of your review, or your overriding opinion of the piece. Don't be afraid to leave the reader with a thought-provoking idea.

# EXAMPLE REVIEWS – ANNOTATED



## EXAMPLE 1

### Cradle Me

**A study of loss and coping. Simon Vinnicombe's suburban tragedy of a family struggling to come to terms with a sudden death is back again at the Lakeside Theatre Studio, after its success in the spring.**

The first student studio slot to be revived, it was regarded as a high point in the universities home-grown shows last year. But how has it fared coming back?

If there's one thing that Cradle Me can't avoid, it's the feeling that a second viewing will almost certainly dilute its impact. Gone is the rush of adrenalin that accompanies seeing a well-made piece of art for the first time.

Instead, with the knowledge of the show's plot entrenched in the memory, it becomes natural to scrutinise the play with perhaps an even harsher intensity than during its initial run.

The show's story follows the loss of a son in a small family, and their changing relationships with the boy's best friend. Characters find comfort and learning in this new dynamic, with a father trying to see his own son in the youth, and a daughter finding a strange mix of the shadow of a sibling, and someone to help her with her own emerging sexuality.

Out of all these relationships, the most potent and eventually destructive is that which involves the mother. A tale of loss and love which almost drives a family right into the abyss.

With characters and relationships the focus of the play, it's a success that each actor brings an accomplished sense of believability to the roles. The ensemble and direction are all responsible for crafting a very good sense of realism and emotional connection within the piece. Which is almost a shame, as the script is by far the weakest aspect of the show. With believability the root of the show's power, it often deviates from well-crafted chunks of dialogue and action to conversations and scenes that sound wrong, and damage the moments when it gets it right. To put it bluntly, the script is consistent only at being inconsistent.

All this means that *Cradle Me* is not a perfect piece of theatre. But it is by no means a bad show.

Rather, it feels like a good performance in a bad framework. Yes, there are moments when it gets it wrong. But when it gets it right, it gets it right in a very good way.

**(Written by Simon Vinnicombe.  
Directed by Joe Lyndon.)**

**This is a good review: it tells you immediately what the play is about and tells you that the writer has seen it before and so is wondering whether it will have the same impact second time round. The review is very strong on the themes of the play, and tells us the actors do a fine job in carrying what is not always a great script. So perhaps we might have expected to hear more about some of the individual performances that were so successful in this regard.**

**Accuracy, grammar and spelling are all essential features of good journalism. This piece has a very basic mistake in it. Can you spot it?**

**This writer begins almost every sentence with a subordinate clause, so that we are nearly at the end of the sentence before we know what it is saying. Variety is also a feature of a good writing style.**



## EXAMPLE 2

### Tis Pity She's a Whore: “Lakeside Theatre’s best show”

**If I was to take a shortcut in reviewing John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s A Whore*, directed by Tony Casement, it would be to repeat the word “perfection” five hundred times over. Because, that is exactly what it was.**

The cast enter down the steps through the audience, blank faced, and in perfect synchronisation, sit either side of the stage on chairs lined up, where they remain until they perform. The contemporary twist of having the cast dress in smart black and white attire, with the exception of the leads, made it even more accessible to the modern day audience. The choice of set kept it clean and minimalist, using shadows and flashlights to create strong and attention-grabbing visuals.

From start to finish, the entire cast kept the piece alive, entertaining the audience with scenes that contrasted from laugh out loud humour to intense, heart-breaking moments. I was worried that I would find myself losing interest due to the nature of the language used, but I am thankful that I was proven wrong. Casement and the cast have transformed this brutal and somewhat disturbing text into a production that won mine, and fellow audience member’s hearts.

The leads of Giovanni and Anabella, portrayed perfectly by Dan Jinkerson and Ashling Edward, brought the characters to life with such an intense chemistry and passion, it caused the tears to spring from the eyes of even the more hard faced theatre goers. You find yourself fully supporting the couple, despite the taboo nature of the subject

they were portraying. However, this merely shows the pairs commitment to their roles, so much so, you almost forget that they are brother and sister.

Showing outstanding moments of comedic timing, Ryan Cogman and Paige Blastock excel in playing the master and servant double act of Bergetto and Poggio. The decision to make Poggio female added a new dynamic to the pairing, but I applaud Casement's choice in keeping any romantic entanglement that could have happened between the two very minimal, focusing more on the friendship than anything.

The climax of the piece poured with (literal) blood, sweat and tears, as few of the remaining alive characters gathered onstage for a showdown of violence, rage and torment. The heart-breaking screams of Joe Lyndon playing the father of Giovanni and Anabella, were particularly hard to watch, capturing the epitome of devastation and anguish. It was evident that every single person on that stage was completely immersed and projected energy throughout the concluding emotionally hard hitting scene.

I can honestly say with the utmost confidence that 'Tis Pity She's A Whore' has been the best show I have ever viewed at The Lakeside Theatre and it will be a struggle for any other show to even come close. Being completely immersed from start to finish, I was astounded by the commitment, energy, humour and emotion of the entirety of the cast, feeling an overwhelming sense of pride for the University of Essex and the Theatre Arts Society as the cast took their final bow.

**Review of 'Tis Pity She's a Whore. Written by John Ford,  
Directed by Tony Casement.**

**This reviewer clearly loved the show, and tells us very clearly why. It's a very readable review full of energy and enthusiasm, highlighting particular performances by the actors.**

**But it assumes the reader already knows a lot about this play – unlikely since it was written almost four centuries ago. There's a reference to the language, but no sense of what sort of play it is and what it's about – or whether its themes still have relevance today.**



## **EXAMPLE 3**

### **Romeo and Juliet**

**Presented by theatre students at the Lakeside Theatre.**

**It's an ambitious aim to present the full, unedited text of Shakespeare's classic love story, adding much more to the stated "two hour's traffic of the stage". Usually the audience know how the play ends, so there is a danger of delaying the inevitable outcome, especially as, in this play, Shakespeare kills off his best character (Mercutio) half way through.**

Luckily directors Richard Hornsby and Joe Lyndon have an excellent understanding of the text, and with a company that gave nothing less than 100% commitment, the three hours traffic of the stage moved at an excellent pace, and the unfamiliar scenes were interesting to experience. As Romeo, Charlie Tripp was vocally strong and conveyed the initial arrogance of his youth and the tragedy of love equally well. Alice Murray's Juliet grew in power as the play progressed, convincingly taking us to each stage of her tragedy and grief without once veering into melodrama. She was accompanied by Emily Clarke's feisty Nurse, her true mother figure, a warm and moving performance.

In such a large cast, there were some diction problems in the ensemble, but some excellent characterisation balanced that out. Lloyd Shankley's Tybalt exuded testosterone, and Dave Burn was an excellent Mercutio, full of life and foolish, misplaced machismo. Dan Jinkerson was an outstanding Friar Lawrence, bringing great maturity to the role and speaking the verse beautifully.

The almost constant keyboard playing was an unnecessary distraction; here less would have been more. However, this was a production of great clarity that has set a high standard for Shakespeare work this year.

**A very good review, economically written and giving the reader a very clear sense of the production. The writer tells us exactly what he likes and what he doesn't, and catches each performance in a couple of well-chosen words. This play is so well known that a description of plot is not necessary – so the writer looks instead at a feature that distinguishes this production from the hundreds of others – the decision to present the full original text rather than the more commonly-used shorter version. The writer feels this decision was vindicated.**



## **EXAMPLE 4**

### **Everyman: Christian Salvation**

**Sitting within the performance space, the audience are welcomed with live musical accompaniment from Joe Lyndon on acoustic guitar. It is an intimate space, with quotes scrawled across the dark walls of the room, instantly asking questions – who/what is Everyman?**

Performing to a sell-out audience; the cast enter, all wearing the same, simplistic costume of white t-shirts and black trousers.

This is with the exception of 'Death', dressed in all black and 'God', all in white. The show begins and it is evident the cast are all in tune with one another, opening with an extremely intricate physical theatre sequence, reminiscent of the work of Frantic Assembly. Their moves are seamless, demonstrating a huge amount trust amongst them.

They take us through the story of Everyman, who is summoned by Death who informs him of his passing, and that he must face judgement. However, Everyman convinces Death to allow him time to find a companion to accompany him on his pilgrimage.

Cleverly, the ensemble cast alternate between playing the titular character, which also emulates that Everyman is a representation of the entirety of Mankind.

We follow them through a narrative of friendship, family, loyalty, materialism and death. Incorporating the musical and performance talents of the cast, treating the audience to even more physical theatre motifs. There was a particularly enjoyable sequence where Everyman succumbed to the realisation that too much of his love had been directed towards material goods.

Directed beautifully by Harry Jordan, Sean Manning, Helen Aspach and Lorna Hale, the story of Everyman has been translated from a mass of Middle English words on a page to a tantalising and thought provoking feast for the eyes in this forty minute production.

**Here the reviewer has concentrated on the mood of the piece and the way that is conveyed by the costumes and physicality of the cast. It sounds like an ensemble piece, which might explain why no individual acting performance is singled out. But the reader would struggle somewhat unless he or she was already familiar with this piece. To understand the review we need to understand that this is a medieval morality play which is clearly allegorical. Don't assume too much knowledge on the part of your readership.**

# GETTING STARTED

**So, now you should have some idea of what a review might look like, it's your turn to have a go!**

## **Don't forget to...**

- Think about what did and didn't work, in the example reviews.
- Give the reader the basic facts about the performance
- Organise your thoughts on your notation sheet.
- Use the guidelines when writing the first draft.
- Send it to [artsed@essex.ac.uk](mailto:artsed@essex.ac.uk) for feedback and advice!

**SHOW****COMPANY****WHERE****WHEN****THE SCRIPT AND INTERPRETATION****SET, PROPS, STAGING AND TECHNICAL DETAILS****PERFORMANCE****IMPACT ON AUDIENCE****EXTRA NOTES**

# FURTHER RESOURCES

To read further theatre reviews, why not visit the following:

## **THE GUARDIAN**

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatre+tone/reviews>

## **LONDON THEATRE**

<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews>

## **THE TELEGRAPH**

[www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/)

## **THE INDEPENDENT**

[www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews)

## **WHAT'S ON STAGE?**

[www.whatsonstage.com/news/](http://www.whatsonstage.com/news/)

Also for further guidelines on how to write a review, we would recommend the following:

## **THE GUARDIAN**

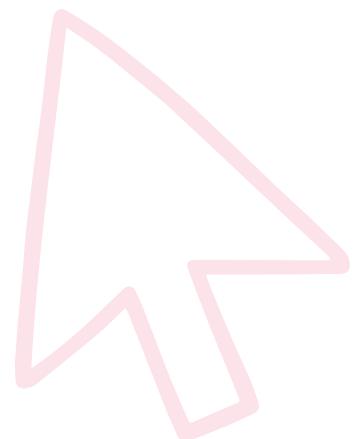
<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2012/oct/04/theatre-criticism-cat-hot-tin-roof>

## **EHOW**

[www.ehow.com/how\\_2188321\\_write-good-theatre-review.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_2188321_write-good-theatre-review.html)

## **BBC**

[www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/stage/be\\_a\\_reviewer.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/oxford/stage/be_a_reviewer.shtml)



# INSPIRATION

“The first rule is that there are no rules – you’re writing a review to express your thoughts and feelings about a theatre show, not taking an exam. There are as many ways to write a review as there are personal responses to any production. There is no right or wrong. Allow yourself to develop **your own distinctive voice**, and be honest about what you really think about a production: convey your enthusiasm for it or explain why you disliked it. Don’t worry about going out on a limb. A timid theatre review is often a dull read. The hardest reviews to write are not about the shows you **passionately loved** or **hated**, but about ones that were just so-so. Oh, and have fun. If you don’t have fun writing the review, nobody will have fun reading it.”

**‘How to Write a Theatre Review’: The Guardian**

“A written account of the strengths and weaknesses of a show is called a **review**. It’s an opinion and its job is to advise others about how good (or bad) something is. People all have different tastes so opinions must always be **justified**. This means backed up with a clear example to support every argument. You must say **why** you did or didn’t like a particular aspect of the work. If you just give your opinion without a good reason others might not trust it. Steer clear of phrases like ‘I thought it was terrible’ or ‘I found it boring’. Not only will you sound unintelligent but arrogant too. Remember that you’re writing about the work of professionals who may have much more experience and understanding of theatre than you do.”

**‘Writing about and evaluating theatre’: BBC Bitesize**

Because the performance of any play is such an ephemeral experience, writing a play review can be an exciting, though difficult, task. You have to be both spectator taking in and enjoying the performance and critical analyst of the production itself. Your job is to describe the production accurately, and then to render a value judgment of it based upon what you have seen and what you expected. The assignment will test your skill as a **reader of the play and as an observer and critic of the production**.

**‘How to Review a Play’: The Writer’s Handbook.**

