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The Next Time Someone Has Something Bad to Say About Your Work...

By Heather Gibson
UCF Forum columnist
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A theatre student recently came to my office a little on the glum side. He was an actor in a production that had received a less-than-favorable review and he wasn't taking it well. He had taken the writer's words to heart and it was affecting his performance.

To be perfectly honest, I felt a little responsible for his pain. As the marketing director for the UCF School of Performing Arts, I had invited the writer to attend our production. Was my interest in publicizing the production interfering with the student's education?

One could argue that since we are an educational organization we shouldn't be inviting media to review the students' work. After all, isn't it the job of the professors to tell the students how they are performing? The grade they receive should reflect their performance on stage, which is our theatre "laboratory."

But it is critical for our shows to be reviewed, and my reasons extend beyond wanting the publicity to help sell tickets. I think the university years are the most important time for actors, designers and stage managers to hear a wide variety of opinions about their work, for better or for worse.

The college years are the ones in which our theatre practitioners need to learn to accept criticism. If actors have made it to a university theatre program, they were likely the "stars" of their high school stage and have been showered with positive feedback throughout their acting careers. It is unlikely they've ever received any criticism. We would be doing our students a disservice if we continued to shelter them at UCF, and then let them receive their first reviews without the safety net that college provides.

Members of the faculty and staff are here for support and advice in times of negative reviews. And a strong peer network can remind students of why they love theatre.

A quick poll of Theatre UCF alumni garnered some great advice:

“A blogger wrote a racially charged article about my role. When that happens, always maintain a level of professionalism and remember that it is the opinion of one person,” said one young alumna.

“Our job as actors is to tell the story of the playwright through the vision of the director. Negative comments can be hurtful, but we must never let them degrade us as people or performers,” another added.

And my personal favorite: “It’s not about making sure the show appeals to everyone, because that’s not what theatre is about.”

The next time someone has something bad to say about your work, remember these four things (which can be applied to everyone):

1. A review is only one person’s opinion. That person may know a little more about theatre than the average person on the street, but it is still just one opinion – and there’s nothing saying that the guy on the street wouldn’t love what the critic just panned...or vice versa.
2. Don’t let a review affect your performance. You have been given direction to perform your role in a certain way. Changing the way you perform your role affects the entire cast and goes against the director’s vision. This can be hard to do, so some professionals wait until the run ends to read reviews, some never read them at all.
3. Design work is teamwork. Your name may be listed as the person responsible for the costume design, but your decisions weren’t made in a vacuum. The director, technicians and actors all affect how the costumes look in the show. And remember, this goes both ways. If you get a compliment, share that credit with your team.
4. Find the positivity. Take a page from the marketing director’s handbook, and find the one great quote in the article to pull out. There’s always something positive in the review, so celebrate that instead of focusing on the bad.

I sent my actor friend out with this advice and a few days later he was feeling much better.

And I feel better knowing that he and all of our students are equipped to handle whatever comes their way – though this proud mother hen is confident that it will be nothing but rainbows and sunshine for my talented crew.

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