



**Young Critics Resource Suite**  
**Workshop 5**

**The 'Unpacking' Process:  
Reflecting on the  
Production**

## Workshop Duration

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The duration of this workshop will depend on a number of factors including the size of your group, the level of critical reflection you feel is appropriate for your participants, and whether you decide to have a panel discussion at the end. It is recommended to allow at least an hour for the group to reflect on the production attended.

## Preparation and Materials

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You will need flip-chart paper, felt tip pens and some blu-tack. Remind participants to bring their notebooks to the session. Have the programme and other materials provided in Workshop 4 available should the group need them for reference.

## Resources

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Watch the 'Advice from the Critic' Video in the 'After the Show' section of this resource suite. This section also contains examples of panel discussions from Youth Theatre Ireland's young critics.

## The Workshop

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### **Facilitator's Note**

*Choose a warm-up and focusing exercises that work for your group. It is a good idea to use an exercise that will function as a reminder of the production. You will find a description of an A-Z alphabet relay below. This is a fun and active approach for participants to re-visit what they saw on-stage.*

*Be mindful, when you are dividing the group into teams, that they will be with these groups for the discussion sessions. You should consider the mix of personalities in each group. This is a fun, noisy activity. It should appear frenetic and chaotic so embrace the madness!*

- **Alphabet Relay (10 – 15 minutes)**

Stick some blank sheets of flip-chart paper to the wall as far apart from each other as you can. Divide the participants so that there are no more than 6 participants in a team. Ensure each group has a flip-chart sheet. Ask the group to line up behind each other facing the sheet. The first person in the line should be a few feet away from it.

Explain that they are going to create an A-Z of the production they attended. The first person is going to write a word they associate with the production beginning with 'A' on the flip-chart sheet. They will then hand the marker to the next person who will write a word beginning with 'B', the next person 'C' etc. until each group has created an A-Z. Tell them it is also a race and the team that completes the task first is the winner.

Declare the winner once a team has completed the relay but encourage all the teams to get to 'Z'. Once each team has finished, go through each list separately with the individual teams. You can also open it up to the whole group for any responses.

#### **Facilitator's Note**

*By starting to recall the show in this fashion you are setting up the group to have a more in-depth analysis of the production later in the workshop.*

*You can question and challenge words on the lists. For example:*

*Was there really a Xylophone in the show or could you not think of anything to say?  
Draw attention to any words you think are particularly insightful.*

- **'Unpacking' the Production (60 minutes – 1.5 hours)**

The term 'unpacking' in this context means guiding the participants through the process of breaking down their initial response to the production. Before the 'unpacking' begins, their thoughts will most likely be articulated through responses such as 'I liked it', 'I loved it', 'I hated it'. A critic needs to 'unpack' these reactions so they can create a fully realised response. The next section of the workshop provides an approach towards guiding the participants on this journey.

### **The Steps**

#### **Step One:**

Keep the participants in the groups they were in for the alphabet relay. Give them some felt tip pens and paper to record the discussion. Remind them to have their notebooks at hand in case they need to reference any of their notes.

Explain that the first task is to describe the production. This task can be taken on by one individual or can be a group task. It needs to be an objective description and participants should concentrate on the facts of the production rather than offering opinion or critical judgement.

Once they have completed this task, ask the group collectively to address the following questions:

*What was the goal of this production?*

*Did it achieve this goal?*

*How did it achieve its goal?*

*What did you see in the production?*

*What did you think?*

*What did you feel?*

### **Facilitator's Note:**

*The questions above are important initial questions in the theatre critic's process. The first three questions relate to the production's goals, execution, and outcomes, and the latter three allow the critic to explore and analyse their response to the show.*

### **Step Two:**

Ask each group to nominate a spokesperson to feedback a summary of the main points of their discussion. Invite the spokesperson from the first group to offer their feedback. After the first spokesperson has finished, ask the rest of this spokesperson's group if any participant has anything they wish to add. Work your way around all the groups so that each spokesperson has presented and all participants have had an opportunity to offer any additional input.

### **Facilitator's Note**

#### **Here are some tips to help you with the process:**

#### **Generalised Statements**

*As the feedback is being offered, it is your role to remind the participants to stick to critical reflection and to help them deepen their reflection where necessary. On a simple level, any broad statement they make must be backed up by the reasoning behind it and any supporting objective facts where possible. For example, a participant might say they didn't think the story of the play was realistic. Ask them to explain their thinking on this by asking questions such as "What wasn't realistic about it?", "Can you give specific examples of when you felt the story wasn't realistic?"*

*If a participant says a show or a performance was deadly boring, push them to articulate why they had this response, identifying specific moments in the play or aspects of the show that prompted their response. If participants are raving about the show, encourage them to identify and describe specific moments that were superb, focusing on why this moment was so brilliant, and how it was executed. If they can't remember, encourage them to look through their notes.*

*It might also be helpful to ban words like "nice," "boring," "funny," "good," and "bad" to encourage them to find more specific descriptors!*

#### **Strong Opinions and Responses**

*The discussions might quickly move into strong expressions of opinion – especially if the show was evocative – so it's important to float between groups and encourage focused thinking wherever necessary.*

*Encourage them to reflect further where they have a strong response to any particular element of the production.*

*For Example, where a participant says, "I thought one of the actors was amazing, their performance made me feel very emotional". You can ask them to reflect on the reasons why they responded so strongly? Encourage them to analyse the choices the performer and director made that led to their response.*

## Be Specific!

*It is also important to remind them that while everyone in the room has seen the production, a critic must presume their audience hasn't seen the play. If a participant is referring to a particular moment in the production, they need to always begin with specific description.*

*"That moment when Christine walked in and said that one line" may be enough to jog the memories of their peers, but it's not descriptive enough for a critical response. Instead, encourage them to share feedback by first providing description, analysing the moment or aspect in question, then providing a judgement or conclusion on that aspect. Highlight that reviewing incorporates all three components of criticism equally: description, analysis, and judgement.*

## Talking about the Makers

*Be particularly mindful of how participants reference the work of persons involved in the production. If one or more participants feel an actor was poor in their role, encourage them to identify the difference between an actor's performance and an actor's talent: the former you can unpack and critique because you saw it (and you have notes, so you can be specific!); the latter is more of an abstract concept, and one which you can never fully identify or prove a point about.*

## Play versus Production

*The distinction between play and production is also important. If participants didn't like how the plot of the play ended, encourage them to make the distinction between the script and the way it was directed.*

*For example, you could ask: "Did you dislike the script, or the production's handling of it?", "What evidence can you draw on to back up this analysis?", "Is that evidence from the script, or from the production?"*

## Be Aware of Personal Bias!

*Part of any critic's 'unpacking' process is identifying any personal bias they are bringing to a production. Remind participants to be open to all possibilities when viewing a production, and leave personal taste at the door. This will allow them to form opinions that serve as the ingredients for a critical response.*

*For example, if a participant personally dislikes Shakespeare set in a contemporary context, they may find it difficult to note anything of value in such a production. Encourage them to return to description in this case, putting a pause on analysis and judgement. By focusing on describing aspects of the production, they will be able to tease out what the show is attempting to do. If they can understand a production's intent, they can then focus their analysis and judgement of the piece on an evaluation of the production's execution of its goal.*

*Hence, their critical view of the production is still credible, because they are analysing the production on its own terms. This is not to devalue personal response, and there may be times when a biased response might need to be acknowledged and unpacked. In these cases, the same process still applies: description, analysis, judgement.*

## And very importantly.....

*It is also important to emphasise that their critical responses matter. If the group are engaged, they will have opinions, and these are the backbone of any good critical response. Don't hesitate in referring to them as 'critics' as this is what they are!*

## Potential Next Steps

### 1. A Panel Discussion

It's very rewarding for the participants to be able to share their points of view in a panel discussion format at the end of the programme. Perhaps your young critics programme could end with a panel discussion in front of other members of your group, friends and family etc. However, you and your group may decide that it this is not the right option for them.

Here is some guidance should you decide to go with a panel:

So as not to put anyone on the spot, ask for panelists to volunteer. If a lot of young people are interested, you can have more than one panel discussion.

To aid with preparation, participants will have notes they have taken during the production, as well as their more finely-tuned notes from the 'unpacking' session. You, as facilitator, should ask the questions and you can tailor them to the panel's strengths. You can also do a trial run with them if you feel this is necessary.

It's a good idea to open the discussion to the audience. By doing so, other young people, who have seen the play, can offer their insights.

### 2. Create a Critical Response and Share it

The 'Creating a Critical Response' section in the resource suite is dedicated to creating and sharing critical responses in different formats including written reviews and video blogs. There are lots of examples of well-crafted critical responses for the participants to look at too.



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