

EDITORIAL

The Refereeing Process at *Theatre Survey*

The Executive Committee has asked me to say something to readers about how the Editorial Board of *Theatre Survey* works. There are many ways to set up the relations between an editorial board and an editor, so many that no one can tell by looking at the product what pattern a given journal or a university press follows. I will start by reviewing some of the arrangements I am aware of and then go on to discuss the board of this journal in particular.

A few journals have no editorial board at all, and there are editors who still undertake to do most or all of their own refereeing, though fewer operate this way now than once did. Some maintain an editorial board without using it for any purpose other than to decorate the masthead. I have served on two such boards myself, without knowing at the outset that either would function that way. A common variant of that pattern is to use members of a large editorial board as specialist readers when their expertise is appropriate. If no relevant submissions appear, a board member may not be called on at all. I have also served on boards that were expected simply to rubber-stamp all decisions of the editor without discussion. One discovers this design only when a member tries to contest a decision instead of endorsing it.

Some journals have all members of the editorial board read all submissions that pass a preliminary screening and decide at an annual meeting which pieces to accept for publication. This process seems unduly time-consuming, costly, and labor-intensive for a small society, not to mention the fact that such a board may not have resident experts on the many subjects ASTR members write about. While this design holds out the possibility of democratization, appointments to any board determine how wide-ranging it will in fact be. This arrangement also presumes a larger supply of potentially-publishable material than I have been seeing, and is probably practical only for a much larger organization that ASTR.

The Editorial Board of *Theatre Survey* at present consists of four people, who, however competent, are not enough to provide expert

readings of the wide variety of articles submitted to this journal. Therefore, in my editorial in Volume 31 (May 1990), I repeated the society's policy that I inherited, which states that "all articles seriously considered for publication will be read by at least one specialist consultant, one member of the editorial board, and the editor." In practical terms the editor, as the first reader, decides whether to send a piece to a specialist, and to what specialist; and on what schedule to consult what member of the editorial board about the piece.

A few of the articles that come to *Theatre Survey* are of such obviously stellar quality that I can send them to a specialist reader and to a board member at the same time. For most, I need a specialist's reading first, and if that reading is positive and seems plausible to me, the piece goes on to a board member. A detailed objection from a specialist is enough to sink an essay, unless I choose to ask for another opinion, which I have sometimes done. I may also seek a second opinion if the specialist's reading is inconclusive. A reasoned negative and an inconclusive vote also equal a rejection, unless the referees have suggested specific improvements which, if made, would render the piece acceptable. Occasionally, even a positive report will call for particular revisions, in which case acceptance is contingent upon the author's making such revisions.

This arrangement distributes power from the editor to the specialist readers and, beyond them, to the editorial board. It seems to me a practical one for ASTR, since it permits the use of a wide variety of referees. Nevertheless, at each level that power can be abused. What is more difficult to define is where legitimate differences of opinion turn into systematic exclusion of a subject, a method, or a group of scholars. One of several reasons for limiting the term of an editor is to minimize the potential for abuse of power. Another is to change the pool of referees, since any editor will depend on a core of readers who have proven to be prompt and helpful. Editorial board members serve for only two years, so that level of review is shifted regularly too.

Although no one wants to receive a rejection, I must report with regret that I see a great many pieces which, in my opinion, could not under any circumstances be made fit to publish in *Theatre Survey*. While my successor's criteria may differ, she or he will also make choices about what to reject, what to ask revisions on, and what to publish. In the process, some subjects, methods, and authors will inevitably be left out.

Powers of high, low, and middle justice come with the job, but I believe ASTR has built enough safeguards into the system that no editor can elude them for long.

—JM