

A Letter to the Editor

On TDR Policy

DEAR EDITOR,

The following paragraphs are an attempt to formulate a peeve which has kept me silent for the last months. Rather than prolonging a useless incommunicado, I would now like, in the spirit of both friendship and the "scientific method," that we discuss this matter—preferably in editorial print—for the sake of some TDR readers and writers who I know share my views:

My first and possibly last piece to be published in TDR (Post-Modern Dance issue, T65) was radically edited in a fashion which was sadly predictable. The objective description of the factual actions of "Boko-Maru," which was printed, were [sic] meant to be an introduction to my analysis of the aesthetic and human motivations underlying the endeavor. It was foreseeable that you would find the second complementary section too "subjective," and dealing with things too personal or ephemeral. However, I do not care so much about the integrity of my "review" as I am concerned and saddened about the philosophy behind the "Theatre Review" section and about the editorial policy that guides the present form and content of TDR.

Your "objective" and "documentary" approach to reporting is a valiant but totally tangential attempt to deal with the hopelessly complex challenge of grasping the developments of the most complex art form in this most complex of all ages. This righteous attempt to record as many experimental developments as possible often does more injustice to the artists and artworks involved than would mere anonymity. Formalism is a recurring emphasis in all the arts, but all theater events should not be given only formalistic analysis. That is not only "passé," even in New York City, but misses the point and purpose of most theater events of today or any other time. It is perhaps a trite, but nevertheless still true fact that the synthesis and relationship of form and content, the personal inspiration, communicative ability and effectiveness upon a public consciousness, the evaluation of actual meaning and informative function of a work of art are important, relevant, and simply of interest to people who are still interested in theater. It is ironic that in a time when theater is one of the few holdouts of humanistic endeavor, the main theater magazine of America employs a system of values that is technocratic, isolational, abstractional. "Newness" and "originality" should not be judged in terms of technique, but in the relationship between *what* needs to be said and *how* it is said through theater. The field of "experimental theater" to which TDR limits its scrutinizing gaze is in itself highly limited by the narrow viewpoint of the current value and function of theater. It is too simplistic to ignore everything that is happening on "traditional" or "commercial" stages around the world, in the name of research of what is supposedly "new" or more important. The challenge to survey and discuss all kinds of theater now happening is perhaps too great for any one magazine. But in a time when theater is rising up out of the technological era and finding new and vital functions in both "establish-

ment” and “anti-establishment” spheres, TDR should find a new order of priorities which helps this cause, and which may promote this revitalization of theater in society.

The scientific formalism of the TDR method is a defensive but misleading effort to give the magazine a distinctive identity. Let TDR be subjective! Let TDR be passionate! Let TDR be an environment for all kinds of stimulus, from mathematical analysis of metaphors to pure crazy personal expressions, opinions, impressions, reactions, feelings. Though the challenge is more complex, the solution is simpler than the present academically restrained conservatism—trust the ability of TDR readers to judge the character of the events being discussed, and of the writers. We are people. Theater is, or can be, people. With the immediacy and direct clarity and heart of a folk ballad, let the technical skill of TDR minds come into full communication. There is absolutely nothing to lose, and certainly many new readers and writers to be gained. Let TDR be *our* magazine, not just an NYU institution. Let it scrutinize the relationship between various kinds of theater now happening, not just favor a protective and elite academicism. All the TDR readers I know are very grateful for the spectrum of events discovered and covered, but they unanimously express a frustration in what they learn about the events through TDR—within the limitations of a given number of words, a description of the artist’s purpose and the effect upon one intelligent subjective individual, recognized as such, would mean more than an isolated technical description of external attributes of the event.

Yours imploringly,
Peter Lackner
West Berlin, Sept. 23, 1975

MICHAEL KIRBY replies:

Yes, we did “radically edit” Peter Lackner’s report on Boko-Maru. In addition to making the more-or-less usual changes in grammar, punctuation, etc., we cut the last three sentences. Unedited, this “analysis of the aesthetic and human motivations underlying the endeavor” read:

A difficulty with the extrapolation of the original ritual of “Boko-Maru” into free physical expression is that the original presupposes a totally blissful and positive experience; but these dancers in exploring sensations sometimes seemed to encounter very strong feelings, perhaps involving their personal lives and even their relationships with their partners—feelings to which they were not allowed to give free and perhaps necessary expression within the limits of the atmosphere defined through the artistic choices of the director, such as the film, music, and entire environment of comfort and relaxation. The audience at times seemed to have slight trouble honestly responding to the positivity of it all, some of which was not as deep as the well-spring of feelings which the entire ritual had the power to tap. The application of this single metaphor, however, gave the event not only an elegant directness, but demonstrated the effect of a very specific approach to dance through sensation.

Apparently, this is an example of what Lackner asks us to publish: “description of the artist’s purpose and the effect upon one intelligent, subjective individual, recognized as