The O’Neill Critics Institute History and Scholarship
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The O’Neill Critics Institute (NCI) was established to assist in elevating the level of arts criticism in the United States and to provide writers the opportunity to grow at the same pace as the arts and artists whose work they review and interpret. At each of the KCACTF regional festivals, institutions that have entered as Associate or Participating productions will be allowed to nominate students to compete for the prestigious NCI scholarship. Students are asked to write critiques of at least four plays at the regional level, with each of the regional finalists competing for the ultimate award at the Kennedy Center each March, a one-month all expenses paid scholarship to the O’Neill Critics Institute. One student from each of the eight regions will be selected as a finalist for the national award.

Chairs from each of the eight regions forward the most promising critique from their respective finalists to Dan Sullivan, director of the O’Neill Critics Institute in Waterford, Connecticut. Along with guest critics and academicians, Dan leads workshops at the national festival at the Kennedy Center for these eight finalists, beginning by examining their respective reviews from each region, and continuing with roundtable discussions of the writing they complete at the national festival. One student, chosen by Dan, earns the distinction of being invited to the Critics Institute in the summer, all expenses paid under the O’Neill Critics Institute Scholarship. There, he or she will work with leading newspaper and magazine critics from across the United States. If room allows, as many as three regional Critics Institute finalists will become eligible for a $1,000 matching grant from the Critics Institute to attend the summer institute program.

The following manuscript establishes guidelines for each of the eight regional Critics Institutes, offering suggestions and criteria for promoting and running the institute. Although each of the regions is encouraged to develop its own “personality” for its individual institute, one that fits the specific demands of each particular region, the guidelines and suggestions below should help to promote continuity within KCACTF.

Promoting the Critics Institute Within the Region
Regional Chairs have the responsibility of promoting the Critics Institute. In the first or second mailing of each year, ideally the one that includes the brochure, Chairs should include information detailing and describing the Institute. To encourage strong participation, each Chair will need to look not only to theatre departments, but also to departments of English, speech and communications, architecture, and even philosophy to find students who have interest and/or experience in writing about theatre and the visual arts. In the promotional material, Chairs should be sure to describe the nature of the Institute, its history and position with the festival, and specify details of the potential award (attractive especially to upper level undergraduate and graduate students).
Criteria for Participants of the Institute and State Festivals
Unlike other participants of the regional festivals, such as Irene Ryan or design candidates, most regions do not offer a state or campus competition for inclusion in the regional Critics Institute. Each region can develop its own set of requirements for the institute, but to encourage active participation, anyone willing should initially be encouraged to take part. A few regions ask for sample pieces of writing from interested students, possibly a review or even another piece of writing about theatre that indicates potential. But for a region that has experienced minimal participation, allowing anyone who expresses strong desire to participate increases interest in the Institute, thus encouraging its growth.

Ideally, each region should appoint a chair to the Institute other than the Regional Chair him or herself. This Chair of the Critics Institute, much like the Chairs of Playwriting or Design, should be responsible for promoting the Institute, for finding participants, and for designing the regional institute. Chairs of the Critics Institute may also try to initiate state level institutes, finding faculty or critics who are interested in helping at state festivals or even on major campuses. In those state festivals that have hosted Critics Institutes, students are offered a more hands-on approach to criticism, often revising one review many times, or writing about specific aspects of a production in order to hone their critical vocabulary and develop their creativity. Usually, these mini-institutes culminate in one or two reviews at the most, sometimes posted, sometimes not. State representatives can help to set up and create interest in these institutes, but state level institutes are not yet a prerequisite for a successful regional institute. They can offer a way to promote the regional institute while weeding out those writers not strong enough to participate, but the success of the regional Critics Institute does not depend on state festival participation in this area.

Designing the Regional Institute
The Chair of the Critics Institute should serve for at least three years, just like the other officers, not only to create continuity between the festivals, but also to build the program. Chairs can come from departments other than Theatre or Performing Arts, but should express a strong interest and background in theatre and writing. Shifting Chairs each year may be damaging; it prevents the Institute from the growing and often inhibits changes that naturally occur within and between regional festivals.

Before each festival, the Chair of the Critics Institute (CCI) works in conjunction with the Regional Chair to locate participants. Many of these young writers naturally come from the host school, and the host liaison should provide the CCI with contact names from different departments to encourage participation. Many graduate students, especially in fields such as English and communications, are intrigued by the Institute and make good strong participants. If the CCI can find a list of potential candidates, he or she should contact them ahead of time, giving them an idea of how to prepare for the institute. This would include reading as many theatre reviews ahead of time as possible, seeing and writing about drama, and even emailing the CCI sample pieces of writing.
The CCI is also responsible for choosing a second person to Chair the Institute with him or her. The O’Neill suggests that this person be a critic local to the area, someone who writes and reviews for a local paper or entertainment magazine. Often contacting either the central newspaper office where the regional festival will be held or a local entertainment magazine will yield the most qualified candidate. The CCI should explain the Institute in detail, making sure the local critic has the time to carefully read student work and be active within the Institute during the actual festival. Some regions establish Co-chairs for three years, one academician and one critic, rather than finding a second critic each year. Either philosophy works well if at least one of the Chairs has a strong background in theatre reviewing.

In addition to a Co-Chair for each state festival, the CCI must find, with the help of the host school, a Faculty Liaison for the Institute. This Liaison, who comes from the faculty at the host university, helps during the week with the Institute, not only finding a number of students who can Xerox reviews, but also scouting out a location within the theatre building where the reviews can be posted and finding a comfortable place to meet. Ideally, the Liaison should have an interest in reviewing (even if he or she is not a member of the Department of Performing Arts) and, if possible, attend and participate in some of the sessions. In terms of meeting spaces, classrooms work fine, but many regions find more comfortable environs for the critics to meet and discuss each other’s work, such as seminar conference rooms where participants can gather around one large table.

The Liaison also needs to locate a computer room for critics to use during the regional festival, one accessible to the theatre, ideally open 24 hours a day. This allows critics the opportunity to write after the evening shows, and it does not give an unfair advantage to those students who bring laptops. Transportation should also be provided for these writers to and from the hotel where they are staying.

**The Institute Schedule and Initial Meeting**

In the past, the Institute has been unwieldy in its demands of students, often omitting participants from attending workshops who also want to compete for Irene Ryan awards, audition for the short or ten minute plays, or participate in design competitions. To avoid this, the CCI should set up a flexible schedule for the participants of each Critics Institute. An initial meeting with all interested critics, usually 2-3 hours in length, should be held early in the festival in a time slot that does not compete with a number of other activities. In this initial meeting, the students should receive packets and schedules. The packets should include the tenets of theatre criticism, guidelines for writing about theatre, several sample reviews (professional, academic, local, as well as examples from previous festivals), and any other information beneficial to establishing strong writing. Many regions include handouts detailing elements of good writing, and/or samples from the critic that year.

In this initial meeting, the significance of responsible theatre criticism should be emphasized, reminding students of the importance of audience. Unlike other writing environments, the Institute offers the benefit of having a real audience present at all times; because of this, students need not only to have a firm grasp on the audience who
will be reading their work, but also an understanding of the importance of writing responsibly and inoffensively for such an audience. Exercises to encourage this are not only helpful, but imperative to assure that the Institute continues its tradition of training students to write well and responsibly.

During the run of the festival, it is almost too much to ask students participating in other aspect of the festival to meet every morning and afternoon, especially since they must find 4-5 hour blocks to write their reviews. The most humane schedule seems to be asking students to caucus for 2-3 hours each morning before the first play. They should see a play each afternoon, and then turn in a review by 6:30 that evening, giving the CCI a chance to coordinate the Xeroxing and the posting of the reviews. The next review of the evening show will be due by the morning meeting, usually at 9:00 a.m. The CCI and the Liaison should meet briefly after each show at a designated space in the lobby to answer questions students may have about the shows before they are sent off to write. This is also a time where students should receive copies of each other’s work to comment upon between sessions. A typical CCI schedule for a festival that runs from Tuesday-Sunday looks something like this:

### Typical CCI Schedule

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
<th>Friday</th>
<th>Saturday</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-3 hour session: Intro. and round table discussion of tenets of criticism and expectations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9:00-11:30 Exercises and discussion</td>
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<td>X-Writing and note taking</td>
<td>X-2\textsuperscript{nd} review due, copied and posted</td>
<td>X-4\textsuperscript{th} review due, copied and posted</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:00 (or directly after early show) Brief meeting in lobby to answer any questions</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00-5:30 Final meeting to discuss reviews of fourth show, and any unfinished business</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>6:30 First and third reviews turned in, copied and posted before 8:00 p.m.</td>
<td></td>
<td>X-1\textsuperscript{st} review due</td>
<td>X-3\textsuperscript{rd} review due</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00 p.m. Brief meeting in lobby to answer any questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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This schedule is, as you can see, already very taxing, so the CCI should not ask students to review any more than four shows during any given festival. Demanding that participants see and write about six plays prevents them from participating in any other aspect of the festival, and reduces participation in the festival. The CCI should also be
understanding if a student actively participating in other aspects of the festival must miss the occasional sessions, and even skip one of the reviews. In the past, the demanding schedule above has limited the number of students participating. The CCI should allow as much flexibility as possible, but to be nominated for the regional award, a participant must complete at least three reviews in the allotted time—the tight schedule is meant to reflect the pressures often associated with writing in the real world.

Schedules are adaptable to any festival format, but the meeting times above should give each region an idea of how many sessions to schedule, and how often students should meet and write. Shifting the schedule to accommodate a different regional schedule is encouraged, but each institute should include

- initial seminars on writing about theatre
- at least one session on responsible theatre criticism
- a thorough explanation of the schedule and expectations of each participant
- a discussion individual pieces of writing
- Xeroxed handouts of each piece of writing for each student
- roundtable discussions of each packet of writing

Between sessions, students should be encouraged not only to write a strong review, but also to read and comment upon the reviews of their fellow participants. Verbal observations from everyone about most of the writing will create a much livelier Institute than those that depend too heavily on comments from the Co-chairs and/or Liaison alone. And, carefully reading each other’s works is one of the most effective pedagogical means to teach writing.

**Responsibilities of the Regional Chair During the Festival**

Too often, the Critics Institute maintains a very low profile. The Regional Chair, during the initial introductions and announcements, should describe the workings of the Critics Institute to the region at large, especially explaining that these students are being trained and that they, like every other participant in the festival, are there to learn, to better their craft, and to participate in theatre activity. Emphasizing the importance that criticism plays in theatre helps to give the Critics Institute a firmer place within the festival, and a more active, present role.

The Regional Chair should also give-out the Critics awards, usually one winner and two runner-up certificates, on the last night of the festival (or whenever the region holds its award ceremony). The CCI, in collaboration with his or her Co-chair and possibly the Liaison, needs to have a decision made as early as possible. This decision often, as the schedule indicates, must be made at the last minute since the final reviews are not turned in until Saturday morning. Helping the Institute achieve a higher profile will ensure that criticism becomes a more integral part of each festival.
Posting the Reviews
Many regions do not post the reviews that students write, and others use anonymous names to facilitate and encourage more active participation. Although this is understandably a “safe” trend, especially considering the active and sensitive audience at each regional festival, such a decision contradicts the intent of the Institute itself. The Eugene O’Neill scholarship was created to encourage students not only to learn to write, but to take responsibility for their writing. They cannot do this as effectively if their names are not posted along side their reviews. Also, even though the community established within the Critics Institute serves as a strong audience, posting reviews gives Institute members an audience that should allow them to learn to write responsibly as well, one that more honestly resembles the tenets of journalistic writing.

Participants should be taught to give and accept responsible criticism, especially within the community of the Critics Institute. It should be the mission of the CCI and Co-Chair to create a community that allows for honest, responsible criticism.

Conclusion
The Critics Institute needs to be a significant part of all regional festivals. Participants of the Institute not only learn to write strong theatre criticism, but they also help to prepare artists for the critical reaction that will inevitably represent a significant aspect of their potential careers in theatre. A healthy Institute offers opportunities for the entire region, increasing the level of intellectual activity and making participating schools more cognizant of their work and outside perceptions of it.