

CHAPTER FIVE

Feature Section Specialties

Jim Molnar, a travel editor at *The Seattle Times*, makes a distinction between travel writing and travel guide writing. The 1980s brought us the resurgence of travel writing, which at its best is feature writing that makes the leap to great literature. Just as in any other kind of writing, it demands hard work and research, plus an extra dose of integrity in a field where special interests are constantly trying to exchange freebies for favorable writing. Of course, the best guard against this is to reject the freebies and write it as you see it.

The Art of Travel Writing

Jim Molnar

Of all the romantic myths surrounding the role and work of the travel writer, the most mistaken is the one that supposes that she or he is somehow exempt from the responsibilities of other journalists and from the travails of other travelers.

While travel writing does allow—in fact, demand—greater flexibility in form and style than, say, conventional feature writing in most contemporary newspapers, it's bound by the same compulsions: accuracy and fairness, thoroughness of observation and research, and conciseness of expression.

And while travel writers with legitimate markets may find more

doors open to them than average tourists — government bureaus and the tourism industry are only too willing to curry good press — the best writers find that only by traveling as their readers do, or would like to, can they develop the kinds of features that meet the highest standards of their craft: the kinds of features that sell.

Successful travel writers must realize that the avocation requires two basic skills, neither of which is easy to master and the effective combination of which is rare.

First, and truly foremost, they must know how to travel. That doesn't mean just going on vacation. It doesn't mean just finding a good hotel or restaurant in a foreign capital. It doesn't mean simply venturing off the beaten track any more than it means toeing the line that tourism promoters have drawn to standard and manufactured attractions. It doesn't mean insisting that the world meet one's expectations. It doesn't mean sifting, like some itinerant miller, the wheat of a trip from the chaff, then baking it into some idealized memory for a movable feast.

Traveling is a way of thinking and seeing, a way of relating honestly to the world and the people in it, a way of accepting the world on its own terms.

Second, obviously, travel writers must know how to write — not just gather information, not just observe, not just describe, and not just put together a lucid sentence.

Writing, travel writing in particular, is a way of evoking an experience in the world. It's a way of re-creating in literate and literary prose not a place, but a thoughtful and intimate appreciation of a place, and the physical, social, political and cultural forces that form it and distinguish it.

All good writing implies an intensely personal relationship with a reader, an acknowledgment at least of the writer's and reader's mutual humanity. A good travel narrative focuses that consanguinity on a shared desire to understand not just a particular destination, but our place in the world at large.

Any travel writing undertaken without those skills and that sense of responsibility, I think, is doomed to disappointment.

Freelance Opportunities

Certainly, making a living as a travel writer is easier when you can arrange and finance your trips from a desk at an established maga-

zine or metropolitan newspaper. Especially now, as more publications ascribe to ethics policies that preclude features subsidized to any degree by a tourism bureau or the tourism industry, the freelancer faces an uphill journey.

But why should a travel writer, any more than any other professional in literature or journalism, expect an easy, uncomplicated or lucrative future? This is a tough way to make a living — a tough field to break into.

I was a writer long before I could afford to become a traveler. I struggled academically with poetry and prose, playwrighting and story telling, then taught literature and writing part-time. I stumbled accidentally into journalism as a way of financing the peanut butter and beans I needed to stave off starvation. After working at a series of small daily newspapers as a reporter covering education, politics, the arts and general features, I became a city editor and a writing coach. A couple of years on a metropolitan newspaper's copy desk put me in position to compete for a rare opening in a travel department with a staff of three.

Making proposals for perhaps a half-dozen major trips a year, I can expect assignments for two or three of from two to three weeks' duration each, based on the needs of my newspaper, schedules and budgets. Each trip yields from two to four lead articles accompanied by color photographs, plus any number of secondary features and columns. Turnaround time, from the date of my return until a story's publication, can range from a few days to several months.

In any given week at *The Seattle Times* travel desk, we receive more than 30 unsolicited manuscripts from freelance travel writers. Some are trying to make their living at the craft; most are casual, at best occasional, writers and photographers who have packaged the events of a vacation for sale. *The Times*, with its two travel sections a week, represents a standard market in metropolitan dailies of regional scope. We publish an average of three to six freelance features a month, including those by our own staff reporters from other news and features departments — about 3 percent of what we receive. The pay, based on onetime publication rights, is competitive: generally from \$200 to \$375, extra for photographs.

To understand what *The Times* — and most other publications — are looking for, it can be helpful to look at travel writing in an historical and literary context.

Historical Roots of Travel Writing

A hundred years ago, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, travel writing was one of the most respectable, distinctive and distinguished forms of popular literature. As both a journalistic and literary form, it reflected a new energy flowing through Western civilization. For the first time, traveling was the province of not only the upper classes and of explorers patronized by aristocrats and merchants and colonial powers, but of an increasingly affluent middle class with leisure time flowing from society's democratization and industrialization.

The most respected poets, novelists and essayists of the day were among its practitioners, and created what still rank as classics of the travel-writing genre: Lord Byron, Charles Dickens, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, D.H. Lawrence.

Like Tennyson, in the voice of Ulysses, these writers were possessed of a need to fling themselves and their readers into a wide world newly vulnerable to general inquiry and observation—"I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees: all times I have enjoyed life / Greatly . . ."

Like Mark Twain, the common people found themselves in the role of "Innocents Abroad." Both from their libraries and living rooms and in the embrace of tour groups devised by Thomas Cook and other entrepreneurs in the vanguard of mass tourism, they could experience a world that previously was a realm of fantasy. Honest shock and enthusiasm were common tones in the "literature of place," as in this passage narrating Twain's cruise into the Golden Horn and his first impressions of Constantinople:

Ashore, it was—well, it was an eternal circus. People were thicker than bees, in those narrow streets, and the men were dressed in all the outlandish, idolatrous, extravagant, thunder-and-lightning costumes that a tailor with the delirium tremens and seven devils could conceive of. . . .

The shops here are mere coops, mere boxes, bathrooms, closets—anything you please to call them—on the first floor. The Turks sit cross-legged in them, and work and trade and smoke long pipes, and smell like—like Turks. That covers the ground. Crowding the narrow streets in front of them are beggars, who beg forever, yet never collect anything; and wonderful cripples, distorted out of all semblance of

humanity, almost; vagabonds driving laden asses; porters carrying dry-goods boxes as large as cottages on their backs; pedlars of grapes, hot corn, pumpkin seeds, and a hundred other things, yelling like fiends; and sleeping happily, comfortably, serenely, among the hurrying feet, are the famed dogs of Constantinople; drifting noiselessly about are squads of Turkish women, draped from chin to feet in flowing robes, and with snowy veils bound about their heads, that disclose only the eyes and a vague, shadowy notion of their features. . . . A street in Constantinople is a picture which one ought to see once — not oftener.

In that so-called Golden Age, the Western travel writer's voice came to carry exotic sights and sounds and odors from the perspective of a culture settling into a world it had just about finished colonizing. The writer didn't simply observe and reflect, she or he tended to evaluate, compare and judge. The writer sometimes became a contentious and aggressive consumer of foreign places and cultures — someone at often uncomfortable odds with a new and very big world.

From the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, mass tourism began to shrink the world. Guidebooks proliferated: Baedeker and Fielding, Fodor and Frommer. But these presented less travel writing than catalog journalism: lists of attractions, hotels and restaurants with a tad of history and a smattering of practical advice for tourists who were starting to leave the tour buses but still covering the same old ground.

As tools for tourists they had — and still have — their merits, but guidebooks never have been the medium for true travel writing. They simulate travel writing, as, says historian/essayist Paul Fussell, tourism simulates travel ("It is to travel as plastic is to wood."). Guidebook prose doesn't evoke a sense of place; it tends to subordinate the individual, both the traveler and the native of the host culture, and the ideal of personal experience to broad-brush, panoramic description; it tends to elevate the familiar, the conventional, the common experience.

As tourism became more subject to the exigencies of mass marketing, only a relative few practitioners of the travel-writing craft persisted, writers such as Hemingway, Capote, Kazantzakis, Lawrence Durrell, and Jan Morris — and they found only a limited outlet in a handful of magazines.

Whereas travel dispatches had been a staple feature of major newspapers before World War II, from the late 1950s through the

early 1970s newspaper travel sections became extensions of advertising departments. The stories became largely promotional pieces wrapped around ads and often subsidized by airlines, hotel chains and tourist bureaus.

But all that has been changing. The successful travel writer is one who is responding to those changes, and in some senses leading them.

Surveys during the past several years have indicated a number of trends: Travel and tourism have become one of the largest, if not the largest, industry in the world — employing one in every 16 workers in the world and accounting for more than \$3 trillion in revenues annually, according to the World Tourism Organization.

More people are traveling independently than ever before, choosing more adventurous itineraries to more remote and exotic destinations as Third World nations open their doors to visitors. Domestically, the affluence of middle-class professionals who compose the bulk of the traveling public, combined with their more stringent schedules, has created a trend toward more, albeit shorter, holidays. Americans are more often turning away from urban destinations toward beaches and less-developed areas, such as national parks and forests.

At the same time, more high-quality travel writing is being published now than perhaps ever before, both for tourists and armchair travelers. Travel books — novels and personal narratives — are a booming trend. And, with a raft of new travel-oriented magazines and the refocusing of many newspaper travel sections, travel writers are starting to find a more active marketplace. As author and travel writer J.D. Brown puts it: “. . . the ‘80s may well be remembered as both the Era of Travel and the Era of Literary Travel.”

Travel Writing Guidelines

What does all this mean for the would-be travel writer? How can she or he catch a corner of the wave? To what are publishers, editors and readers responding?

Here are some guidelines:

First, remember that your writing must be very good. Standards are high these days, in part because there is so much writing to choose from.

Quintessential practitioners such as Jan Morris, Paul Theroux

and the late Bruce Chatwin have gone to lengths to disassociate themselves from the term "travel writer," hoping to distance themselves from the standards and guidebook formulas of the 1950s and 1960s. They want to be known and judged simply as writers who employ the devices and conventions of the novelist and storyteller in the "literature of place."

A good travel story is just that: a story, with all the plot and tensions and sophistication that it implies. A story is, for all that, a simple thing. It generally is about a person reacting to circumstance, to a place, to other people. For the travel writer, that main character is often her- or himself. It is through the writer's emotional response to a place that the reader becomes involved, gains insight, and is able to savor a taste of a destination.

Travel writers who overreach, who attempt to define a place based on a few days or even weeks of observation and experience, tend to lose their own perspective—not to mention the reader—in a bog of generalizations. Just tell what happened, what you saw and felt. As in the Twain passage on Constantinople, that means using detail to evoke rather than simply describe: to show rather than tell. As any good writer knows, the successful travel writer learns that his most effective tool is the verb, not the adjective.

Take this passage from a piece on Ireland by Mike Nichols, humor columnist with the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*:

Geographically, Ireland is an island rumpled and ridged. It is an island of sharps and flats—the topography rises and falls, like the notes of an Irish jig. . . . You can drive north to south, tip to tip, in a day.

But that would be living on American time. On Irish time, the same trip takes longer. So slow down. Match your metabolism to the pace of a gray old squire as he strolls along some village high road, walking cane in hand, glen-plaid cap on head. Match your heartbeat to the 4/4 time of an Irish ballad. . . .

Pack a poet's paraphernalia in your bags when you go. Take a trope or two for the road: Metaphor, simile, eponym, metonymy, even a judicious hyperbole now and then—they all have their place in this literary journalism. Let a single detail create an entire panorama.

Because a story without people in it usually isn't much of a story, the travel narrative that depends on descriptions of buildings and landscapes, city streets and bus routes, becomes plodding. Populate your stories with the people you meet along the way.

Often, the most successful travel feature is a simple account of a serendipitous encounter with a character you have met—a dialogue that encapsulates and illustrates your impressions of a place, evoking an emotion or spirit that lets the reader share your relationship with a land or culture.

Bob O'Sullivan, a highly successful travel writer frequently published in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Seattle Times* and other newspapers, focuses his narratives on other tourists. The technique, applied sensitively, gently, emphatically, can allow readers to see themselves—their virtues and their foibles—in relation to places they travel.

Most of my trips for *The Times* have been to Europe. The stories I've been happiest with have centered on people: the peasants I stopped to talk with in a sugar-beet field in Romania, who shared their lunch with us under the chestnut trees that lined a dusty Moldavian road, who gave my young son a ride on the back of an ox; the Gypsy women in Sofia, Bulgaria, who, keening wildly, chased me several blocks through the marketplace for suggesting that I take their photograph; Shamus, the grizzled, pipe-chewing Irishman who explained that it could take as long as a day to contemplate the perfect stone to fit into the wall he was building along a County Mayo pasture; the Greek olive farmer on the slopes of Mount Parnassus who insisted on giving me a ride back to town on his tractor because he couldn't understand why anyone would choose to walk for recreation.

Finally, be aware that, especially now as tourism assumes a greater economic profile in the world, travel is surrounded with issues that reach beyond the sphere of the individual tourist. Tourism has profound impacts on the social, natural, cultural and economic environments of the places that embrace it. Deforestation, waste and pollution, energy depletion, exploitation and erosion of native traditions—they all are issues that the tourism industry and individual travelers are just beginning to be aware of and that the travel writer should not ignore.

A travel writer must pay close attention to the environment she or he is writing about. The days of composing idealistic travelogues that foster tourists' sense of isolation from the complexities of the often dark and desperate lives that swirl about them seem to be drawing to a close.

Readers can sense shallowness in a story, just as editors can sense a writer's ignorance and lack of perspective. I usually spend triple or qua-

druple the time researching the culture, history, politics, economy and environment of a destination that I spend on the trip itself.

A 1,500- to 2,000-word feature—the longest stories that will find a warm reception from most newspaper and magazine editors—should have a veritable library of research to support them and give them context.

In the end, travel is hard work. Travel writing, I think, is even harder work. And both, for our readers, touch the same chords.

As Paul Fussell says: Travel has a touch of the illicit to it; it “triggers the thrill of escape from the constrictions of the daily . . . from the traveler’s domestic identity.” But it is no less a humbling experience, a desire for growth and a pursuit of understanding: “It is as learners that explorers, tourists and genuine travelers . . . come together.”

Jim Molnar has been an editor and writer with *The Seattle Times* travel department for more than six years. He’s worked as a reporter, feature writer, copy-editor, news editor and writing coach in California and the Pacific Northwest for some 20 years. He has also taught writing, editing and the oral interpretation of literature part-time at several colleges and universities.

Perhaps the biggest revolution in the United States during the last 30 years has been in what we eat. In the 1950s we were primarily a white bread, meat loaf nation with the occasional take-out container of chow mein. As we became more of a polyglot nation and a better traveled one, thoughtful food writing became a necessity for readers. How else would we know what was being served to us each day? We learned to eat with chopsticks and how to make our own pasta. At the same time we were all paying attention to our health. Again we turned to the food pages to find out what was best for us. During this time there emerged a host of food writing superstars and among them is Mimi Sheraton. Here, using her years of experience, she provides advice for the novices who wonder if food writing is right for them.

Eating My Words: What It Takes to Be a Good Food Writer

Mimi Sheraton

Now that eating is “in” and chefs so often achieve the status of superstars, food writing has become a glamorous profession. Barely

a month goes by during which I do not receive two or three letters from young (and not so young) hopefuls each asking, "How can I learn about food?" It is a temptation to answer, "If you have to ask, you're never going to make it." But remembering what it felt like to be young and hopeful, I resist and instead write an expanded version of, "You have to know how to write well and you must know food."

In fact, the first answer would be more accurate, for I really believe that a passionate love of food is essential to success. The best practitioners in the field are those who ate first and wrote later, who followed a natural inclination to learn all about dishes and ingredients, who loved visiting food markets and buying cooking utensils and who found their way to the literature of food, all at considerable expense of time and money. Finally, such dedicated eaters came to their rewards: They were paid to do what they like to do best.

All would be to no avail, of course, if these blessedly obsessed buffs were not able to transmit their enthusiasms and findings to readers. That is where writing well comes in, but that is the talent most easily understood by anyone who will be reading this, and so needs no elaboration.

Passion, then, is the first essential and to that add a lively curiosity that drives a reporter to eyes-on research. "How do they make smoked salmon anyway?" he or she might wonder, just enough to find out, thereby learning the different quality points. Originality and ideas are needed because believe it or not, with all of the food articles around, there are hundreds of ideas that have never been explored.

Add to the above generous handfuls of cynicism and skepticism, the twin allies of any good reporter, and the dish known as a food writer begins to jell. With luck there will be a healthy sprinkling of personal disinterest, prompting the writer to report on findings, letting the chips fall where they may. Too many food writers are corrupted not by money, but by the desire to be popular with each other, or with restaurant owners and shopkeepers and anyone else who can ease their paths with plenty of cushioned red carpet.

In fairness to writers, it should be said that too often their editors and publishers are susceptible to the same blandishments and so short-circuit or discourage copy that tells the whole, unadorned truth. Which brings us to the subject of advertisers and their role in all of this, which should be no role at all. They should just pay the bills and go away quietly. Reviews and reports slanted for advertisers lose credibility, and it takes a

few bad reviews to make the good ones believable.

In hiring young food writers, editors should restrict them to the stories they are equipped to cover. On-the-job training has no place in criticism, for example. Too much is at stake both for the food industry and for the readers. Few writers are interested in and capable of covering all aspects of the food scene. The nutrition-minded reporter has her place but it is rarely as a restaurant critic or as a judge of fancy foods. Criteria applied would not be fair or valid and many a restaurant owner would be given a bum rap. Unless the writer is interested in the subject, the article will not be convincing. Good writers write what they want to read but cannot find, not what they think their peers, their publishers or their public wants to see.

With it all, the successful food writer makes it seem like fun, always aware that this most human of subjects is part spiritual, part scientific, part physical, part psychological. Food is all things to all people and the food writer is its champion.

Food has always been a hobby for Mimi Sheraton, who for seven years was a writer for the *New York Times*. She is now under contract to *Condé Nast Traveler*, where she travels around the world as the magazine's food editor. She also publishes *Mimi Sheraton's Taste*, a newsletter that primarily reviews New York restaurants. *Mimi Sheraton's Favorite New York Restaurants* is scheduled for publication by Prentice Hall Press in 1991. In spring, 1992, a similar guide to dining out in the United States will come out. Other books in print include *The German Cookbook* and a new edition of *From My Mother's Kitchen*.

If I remember the statistics correctly, the average American watches some 27 hours of television a week. With cable and the reruns, we can see just about everything that ever appeared on this relatively new medium. So if you are a TV addict you may already be an expert of sorts and have as good a chance as anyone of breaking into the field of television criticism. The tack you want to take is up to you, but since we are all experts you had better be clever, wise, and write well.

On Being a TV Critic

John Voorhees

The secret of being a TV critic is that it's a position that's still in the process of being defined—and that's partly due to the nature of TV itself.

Whatever your interest is, chances are that interest is prominent on television in some form or another, be it sports, music, drama, news, personalities, history, humor, religion — you'll find 'em all on TV and in a great variety of formats, from the inspirational to the silly.

In some ways, writing about TV is like that group of blind men describing an elephant. And because of the all-encompassing nature of the medium, it pretty much allows the individual critic to define the job as he or she sees it.

Television may take a drubbing — like the weather, everyone complains about it — but nevertheless if you write about TV, you'll not want for readers. Everyone is interested in and aware of TV and while just as many may disagree with your opinion as will agree with you, they'll still be interested in what you have to say.

The best TV critic wants to do it all, even while recognizing that's impossible. In the earliest days, TV criticism was limited to writing about what people saw the previous night on a couple of networks. Today, TV includes not only the three commercial networks but public TV, cable TV, pay TV, public access TV, as well as videocassettes, and the emphasis has changed to previewing programs.

But because of the wealth of TV that exists, TV criticism can handle any number of approaches and I find, as I survey my colleagues, that the best TV criticism is related to the characteristics of the individual practicing it. If that individual is intelligent, perceptive, has curiosity, an active mind, and can write, it's likely his or her criticism will reflect those qualities — and be interesting and thoughtful to read.

Pick Your Own Approach

Some TV critics are more fascinated by the inner workings of the industry than that product it creates — the *People* magazine approach. Some like to ponder *Whither Goest TV?*, since, after all, it is one of the most pervasive and powerful mediums of communication yet devised.

Others, and I number myself among them, like to think of newspaper TV criticism as a useful service for the reader — and one, incidentally, unavailable elsewhere on a daily basis. All of us, I'm sure, try to include aspects I just mentioned, but I see TV as yet one

more aspect of our culture clamoring for our time and thus I see my primary function as a surrogate viewer checking out what's happening across the board and offering recommendations, always qualified, of course, with one's own prejudices and interests.

TV criticism will undoubtedly reflect the publication itself. *USA Today's* TV reviews are very much in the vein of that newspaper—brief, to the point, and without much chance of subtlety, either in writing or thought. The *New York Times*, on the other hand, has several critics—one concentrates on documentaries and news-oriented programming, while another reviewer concentrates solely on entertainment programs. Here there is space available—and a chance for the writer to ruminate on the topic at hand.

One of the very best TV writers is the *Washington Post's* Tom Shales, who manages to be entertaining while also providing a good deal of information and a thoughtful examination, whatever the subject. But a newcomer would probably be best advised to concentrate on communicating information to the reader, letting style develop over time.

After you've been writing for a period, readers begin to know your weaknesses and strengths, your likes and dislikes, and behave accordingly. If you recommend something, readers who generally agree with you will try to see it; others, who know your tastes are dissimilar, will avoid it—and make a point of seeing something you have dismissed as trivial.

The key to TV program criticism, as I see it, is to try and discern how successfully any program—newscast, TV drama, comedy, sports, children's show—has achieved what it set out to do, and judge it accordingly.

Sure, sometimes it may be just another cop show or sitcom—but within each programming genre there are highs and lows, successes and failures. And the readers, in order to make up their minds whether to invest valuable time in watching it, need this kind of information. You need to ascertain what you think the producers were aiming for—and whether they succeeded or not.

Reaching Your Goals

So far we've been talking optimum conditions but if you begin to write in this area, you'll soon become aware of how seldom you feel you've reached your goal.

First of all, there's the simple problem of time. Forget 40 hours a week. If you're trying to keep track of what is happening in all areas of the medium, you're going to be spending a lot more time than that looking at cassettes of everything from children's cartoons to adult dramas for cable. If you don't *like* watching TV, this is not the career for you. And if you try to write about it without really looking at it, you can find yourself in trouble. We may be told people don't watch TV that closely, but make one mistake and someone will call you on it. Writing about that movie you didn't finish seeing is just asking for trouble.

The second major problem after time is space. If you like writing about TV and watch a lot of it, you'll never have as much space as you'd like.

Most newspapers allot a set amount of space to the subject, and it's up to the critic to decide how to use it. One of the biggest dilemmas is the choice between the long review or article and one containing a number of short pieces of information. I can't say that I've necessarily resolved this question. It can be very rewarding to write in depth about a certain topic but you're also left with the nagging feeling: What about the programs I didn't mention? If viewers miss them because you didn't write about them, even briefly, preferring to write at length about one, have you served the reader to the best of your ability? Who wins?

Writing TV criticism is one of the best ways to learn to write concisely. True, there are frustrating moments when you'd like to write just one more paragraph to call attention to some subtlety, some fascinating inside information you'd like to pass along. But there's also a satisfaction in re-reading a column in which you may have had to leave out certain details but which still communicates essential information that will help as wide a range of readers as possible. And as you agonize over what to leave out, you'll discover new ways, shorter ways, to deliver the information. A good sentence can sometimes be as on the money about what you want to say as a paragraph—and remember that readers are as pressed for time when reading a newspaper as they are for watching TV.

My response convinces me that readers appreciate concise information they can trust.

One of the best ways to get into writing about TV, if you are not already working for a newspaper, would be to attempt to make

contact with a community or area weekly newspaper or even monthly magazine.

This in turn, would allow you to contact your local TV stations and make arrangements to view upcoming programs, either via cassette or at the station. All TV stations, network or independent, are eager for more publicity and they are likely to be sympathetic to your requests—especially if you can soon show them some examples of your work. You can also get a foot in the door by asking to write about their local programming. Each station does some local programming, in addition to the news, whether it be religious programs or children's programs. This kind of programming too often gets lost, when it comes to the major newspapers, and a station will probably take kindly to your interest along these lines.

Beyond Just TV Watching

Thus far we've been pretending the job consists mostly of viewing cassettes and writing about them. Wrong. Those are the things you sandwich in between other things, such as reading news reports about TV, dealing with mountains of publicity mail, fax reports and phone calls from producers, networks and agents. You'll be bombarded by calls wanting to know if you wouldn't love to interview almost anyone connected with a program. (I make it a rule never to talk with anyone unless I've been able to see the program prior to the interview.)

Then there's the public that calls to (a) chat, (b) complain, (c) ask questions, (d) accuse you of taking their favorite program off the air, (e) ask how that movie ended last night because they fell asleep before it was over, (f) tell you how stupid you are because you don't like their favorite series, possibly even accuse you of racism, and (g) occasionally even say they like your work and read you every day—even when they don't always agree with you.

The latter calls are the best, of course, and make it all worthwhile.

Readers are more prone to call than write—remember their time is precious, too—and more likely to write when unhappy than when they approve of what you're doing. How many of us write letters of commendation but are quick to fire off a note when annoyed or angry? I take the small amount of personal mail I receive as an indi-

cation most readers are reasonably happy with the quality of my work.

In addition to convincing your superiors that your approach to TV criticism is the best one—especially if a competing newspaper might take a different one—there's still one more problem: TV schedules. Every day you have dozens of chances to make mistakes, to write about a program and place it on the wrong day at the wrong time on the wrong network—or any combination of the three. It may not be your primary responsibility to worry about schedules but it's still a necessary chore. Nothing can make you look stupid faster than making mundane errors involving schedules and nothing angers a reader more quickly than to interest him in a program—and then give him the wrong information about when to view it.

After all, how are they going to believe you know what the program is about, or whether it is good or bad, if you can't even get the date, the time and the channel right?

That dad-blamed TV critic . . .

John Voorhees reviewed television full-time for *The Seattle Times* from 1971 until 1990. He started at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 1953 where he reviewed art, music, film, theater and TV.

In music criticism there is no faking it. Either you know music or you don't. Just being a great writer is not enough. Besides, we know great writing is built on information, and if you are not informed about music you can't be a very good music critic. Of course, there are various levels of music criticism. A rock critic needs less training than someone reviewing classical music, and a local weekly will require less training than the *New York Times* does, but all writers should strive to know all they can about the subject matter they are covering. Daniel Cariaga is a classical music critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, but much of what he says can be transferred to all forms of music criticism.

Being a Music Critic

Daniel Cariaga

A lifetime of intelligent listening is the first and inescapable requirement for one who wants to be a music critic. Nothing less will do, and much more may be needed.

Being a music critic means being an interested and analytical listener, an observant member of the audience, a well-equipped writer, and an advocate for the musical consumer.

While wearing each of these hats simultaneously, one must also make sense of the world he covers; each review or article should reflect the reality of the year and place in which it is written.

Daily newspaper critics, like all working journalists, cover the news as it happens. This means the critic will attend concerts in the evenings, on weekends, and whenever they take place. He will be on call to conduct interviews when, and often where, the subject agrees to talk. He will also be expected to attend press conferences when they promise to offer breaking (as opposed to already leaked) news.

One prepares for the profession by studying music, listening to it for years, having broad musical interests and, ideally, if not always, being a member of one of the musical professions. As one grows in the job, he will acquire the skills of musicological research and interpersonal networking which will add to his effectiveness.

Have Varied Musical Experiences

Being a music critic is easy. Just get a job, then hold onto it.

You get a job by being qualified. Which means, if you are interested in classical music, you have experience in hearing, and writing about, opera, symphony, piano recitals, choral and vocal music, and the repertory of chamber music and instrumental literature.

There is no substitute for having known Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata (and Opus 7, or Opus 110) since the age of 13, or having heard "Aïda" (or "Bohème" or "Boris") regularly over a period of years. Or having hands-on experience of the chamber music repertory. This is knowledge which makes individuals civilized, and being civilized is an asset to a critic.

In addition, the music journalist should understand, by having observed, the workings of the music business and the day-to-day operations of symphonic organizations, professional presenters and academic institutions. What he does not already know or understand when he comes on the job, the conscientious critic should endeavor to learn or master. This means asking questions, keeping files, reading other periodicals systematically, and in general keeping abreast.

Ideally, the critic himself will have studied conducting, piano, voice, one or more instruments, composition, music theory and the

history of the art. Such studies give you the background to observe knowledgeably the field you now cover.

Avoid Clichés

Your reviews should be descriptive, colorful, cogent and uncluttered by technical terms. An intelligent, music-oriented adult should be able to read and enjoy them without resorting to a dictionary.

Writing is easy: make a point and move on; keep it short; vary your vocabulary. Don't fall into ruts. Stay away from other people's clichés, and try to avoid inventing your own.

The verb "to be" is the bane of the critical profession; avoid it—nothing is as deadly as using the verb "was" time after time in describing an event. Use active verbs, find colorful alternatives, vary your sentence length. Short, declarative sentences are tonic, but they must be true.

Comparisons are the soul of reviews: "Krips' tempos emerged slower than Jorda's, but less articulate." "Rubenstein's approach to the ballade became muscular and gutsy, Brailowsky's more analytical."

The job of writing about music for a general audience demands an ability to describe performances and report events, a background of sufficient listening experiences to enable one to make refined and illuminating comparisons, an instinct for recognizing quality, and an ear and eye for detail. A sense of humor, always present, and judiciously applied, is a bonus for the ordinary critic, a necessity for the serious practitioner.

A critic must be incorruptible. His devotion to fair reporting must override all other considerations. There will be certain artists he cannot judge fairly because of friendship, bias, past association or present lust. He should decline to review those artists. And if he is true to himself and his standards, he will eventually command the respect of his readers.

A prize-winning critic, Daniel Cariaga began his musical life as an accompanist to singers and violinists, a pianist for dancers, and a pit conductor. He was for eight years the music and dance critic of the *Press-Telegram* in Long Beach, California. In 1972, he joined the music staff of the *Los Angeles Times*; over the years, he has interviewed for the *Times* numerous major figures in the field. He also serves as Southern California correspondent for *OPERA NEWS*. Since 1970, he and his wife, mezzo-soprano Marvellee Cariaga, have given more than 400 recitals in North America, and at sea.

The arts and entertainment side of the features department at a newspaper is usually a little world unto itself. The larger the newspaper, the more focused and specialized the jobs become. The theater critic has one of those most specialized of jobs. It's not a place where a general assignment reporter can come in and take over. It requires an understanding and love of the theater. Magazines with theater critics present the same situation—the critics have to know theater and know it well. Once you start with that foundation you can begin to take Dan Sullivan's advice on how to break into the field and also how to discover if this is what you really want to do with your life.

How to Become a Theater Critic

Dan Sullivan

So you want to be a theater critic. Very well. Arise. You are now a theater critic. There is no accrediting committee. There is no qualifying examination. You are a theater critic if you can convince people that you are one.

This will involve getting your stuff printed. (We will get to the idealistic part of this essay in a minute.) You will probably not be able to get the editor of your local daily to print it because he has no evidence that you know the first thing about writing for a newspaper. Your PhD dissertation on "Doctor Faustus" will be of no help here. He wants to see clips of stories you have written.

If you don't have any clips, forget about working for a daily paper for the moment. Find the editor of a humbler publication—a community college paper, a weekly, a shopping mall handout. Tell him that you'd like to review plays for him and that you'll do it for nothing.

Get 50 reviews published and paste them into a scrapbook. Now you have clips. Go to see the first editor. Maybe he'll give you a stringing job. If not, tell him that you'll call him again in three months, and continue at your present post. But ask the editor for some sort of payment.

Well, how do you like it so far? Is it as much fun as you thought

it would be, getting in to see all those shows for nothing? If the routine is getting burdensome after only 50 shows, then you don't want to be a theater critic. I have been attending shows for a living for more than 25 years and I still think it's fun. Some nights it's even fun to write about them.

It's work, as well. If only we could just say Yes or No to a show, and then go home! Unfortunately, we have to find reasons for our yeses and noes. This takes thought. Thought takes effort. Virgil Thomson, whose music criticism you should look up in the library, used to say that a review isn't an exam that a critic gives, but one that he takes.

And one that he takes in public. Let the critic attribute one of Lady Bracknell's lines to Miss Prism, and there will be a letter to the editor about it in the Sunday paper. (If you don't know who Lady Bracknell is, maybe you should think about reviewing TV.) As a critic you will also hear from people who were offended by something you wrote. Perhaps you'll hear from the leading lady's brother, a linebacker for the Minnesota Vikings.

The Bottom Line Is Truth

Should it bother you that your review upset somebody? Yes, a little. Critics who enjoy wounding artists are creeps. So examine your conscience. Did you accuse the actress in question of being a bad person? No. Did you say she was a bad actress? No. You said that she gave a bad performance last night, and here is why it was bad. In other words, you dealt with the work. In other words, you did your job.

What is the job? Theater people will argue that you and they are in the same business. You're both working towards "better theater" in the community. True. But they are in the business of putting on plays, while you are in the business of writing articles for a newspaper. Two different processes.

Your job isn't to promote theater. It is to say what happened at the theater last night. The reporter in you doesn't even care if the show was good or bad—either way, he's got a story to get out. Happily, the reporter in you is balanced by a theater lover who cares a lot whether the show was good or bad. But not to the extent that he will lie on its behalf. The critic's bottom line is the truth.

Whose truth? Why, the critic's truth. It won't be everyone's truth. Some nights it won't be anyone's truth but the critic's. But he

is stuck with it. And if he sticks with it, and doesn't waffle, he and his readers will work out an understanding. I've had couples tell me that I'm an infallible guide to theater in Los Angeles: If I hate something, they'll love it. Fine, we're communicating.

But if I start to hedge, the line goes dead. Say your "noes" with respect, then—but say them. Not only does it keep you honest, it keeps the theater community honest. As Claudia Cassidy of the *Chicago Tribune* used to say: "The critic who puts up with the second-rate, will soon find himself presented with the third-rate."

Do Your Homework

Be careful to make your yeses and noes specific. Specifics are arrived at by asking oneself a series of questions. Was it useful to have Lady Bracknell played by a man? Was it a good idea to set the tea party scene by a Hollywood swimming pool? Why did you like Gwendolyn but not Cecily? The more times the critic has seen the play, the more informed his answers will be.

But he must never stop doing his homework. This poses a problem for the critic who also serves as his paper's theater editor. Too much time will go to office chores—making out schedules, arranging photo calls, proofreading copy, explaining to one's publisher that we can't cover his niece's high school show without covering them all—and not enough to preparing himself for the evening's exam. Yet ultimately that's what he's graded on.

Another pressure is that of the deadline. Whether your deadline is midnight or noon, you'll always wish that you had ten more minutes. Sometimes you'll hear yourself grunting at the typewriter as you try to nail down the particulars of a performance. At other times—when the show is either wonderful or wonderfully horrible—you'll write with ease. You will write in good moods and in bad moods, in sickness and in health, always trying to keep your eye on the show, not on your own private twitches, which will manifest themselves without help. Virgil Thomson again: "Keep your opinions in your back pocket. They'll come through anyway."

Criticism is personal, though. I'm sometimes asked if I ever do any "real writing." Reviewing is real writing. Compared with the fiction writer, the critic may be "hugging the shore," to use John Updike's phrase. But he does get into the boat and push off. His subject isn't just the play. It is himself at the play, and things happen

