

## POINTERS FOR KCACTF RESPONDENTS

Thank you for being a part of this important service to the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and volunteering your time to respond to a performance at a KCACTF Region 4 school. Here are some key pointers to keep in mind.

Responding is:

1. Respectful of the work and the process: Theatre is a collaborative art, and as such implies that artists working as a unit are built around mutual respect. Artists, individuals and companies are vulnerable, especially before a respondent. We must respect and acknowledge this vulnerability without deferring to it.

2. One person's response, not a definitive word: Respondents can reduce initial tension by assuring the company that they are going to share their personal, professional experience of the company in one particular night, and that those experiences have validity based on experience and individual truth. To that end, respondents must respond, not pontificate to what they see, not what they expected to see. They should avoid phrases such as, "What I wanted/needed to see." Instead, they should use, "This is what I saw" or "This is what you presented" or even the ask the question, "Is this what you wanted me to see/feel?" If "yes," the respondent discusses the choices the company made that got them there. If "no," the respondent and the company discuss the choices that interfered and other options.

Respondents must avoid the temptation to redirect the work. Toward that end, a "disclaimer" of sorts has been developed to help frame a context for every response:

*KCACTF Oral Response Disclaimer (please say this or something very much like it in preface to every KCACTF response) I'm here representing the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival and I'm charged to respond to the performance I just experienced. I was not a part of the process that helped bring the play life, and I cannot comment on your growth in the work during that process but I can respond to what I just experienced as an informed member of the audience with a certain amount of training and experience as an artist and a teacher. I am not the art police, the oracle of theatre or the supreme authority on how this play works best in performance. Hopefully some of the things I'm about to say will resonate with the very fine training you are already receiving, and if so, please take my words to heart as the gifted and insightful comments of a remarkably astute theatre professional. On the other hand, if I say something you don't agree with or you hear something that doesn't resonate with what you've been hearing all through rehearsals, for heaven's sake dismiss my remarks as the lunatic ravings of a sadly misguided schmuck with no discernable taste whatsoever. No matter what we say here in this session, you should in no way alter the choices that you and your director have so carefully built.*

3. Being cognizant of problems during the production: If audience members laugh inappropriately or exhibit signs of restlessness, respondents may focus on the sort of participatory response the work should evoke, including considering whether the response received is consistent with that which the playwright intended. The experience of the respondent of a production is always grounded in the company's understanding of the script, or the company's ability to find its truth (basic conflict, polar attitudes, major metaphors, structure, music, imagery, etc.), and then to transfer that truth to the stage.

4. Retaining your sense of humor and personality: Make certain to use your own experiences and your personality to guide you and to help you create bonds and deliver information.

Responding is NOT:

1. Disrespectful;
2. Adversarial;
3. Focused on the respondent (past experience, research, ideas);
4. Condescending;
5. Redirective;
6. Generic;
7. Vague or unclear;
8. Effusive;
9. Comparative;
10. Personal;
11. Dishonest;
12. Humorless;
13. Self-important;
14. Or prejudiced by previous performances or expectations.

Possible Approaches:

1. Problem Solving Method:

Respondents develop individual methods of responding to productions depending upon their training, experience, personalities, and souls. The problem-solving method of responding has been proven successful for many respondents because it is non-threatening: Respondents pose questions about the problems and traps solved in a production. Together, with the director and company, they seek and evaluate solutions. For example, respondents may begin by considering the traps inherent in the script/theatre space; what this company did to avoid the traps; where the company stumbled; the level of choices made by the company (original? clear? effective?); or whether the company took risks or played it safe.

2. Chronological Method:

Or a respondent can detail what he or she experienced from the moment of entering the theatre through the curtain call, a method that is easy to facilitate by taking good notes throughout often marked by quotes, moments in the play, or visual elements. This often provides the company with a thorough and thoughtful journey through the entire play.

### CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM:

Respondents can say almost anything about a play if they are connected with and not isolated from the company; they are perceived as truthful, sensitive, and knowledgeable; and they organize effectively the information they wish to present. It's important to begin positively and to try to reduce anxiety.

Respondents should give the message that they are there to share one personal, informed view of one performance that does not take process into account. Respondents can often give tougher advice to a company with a strong production than one with a weak one. And they can often be more specific at the end of a response than at the beginning, especially if they work at first to be heard. The respondent's job immediately is to discover what the company can and cannot hear—and when to best present information in the course of a response. The trick is to open up each company and to remove defenses and find language to make an audience receptive.

### Key Factors to keep in your response.

Organization: You want to cover all five areas—choice of play, directing, acting, design, and execution of design—but you can do this in any order you want. Let the response or the play guide you, and by all means, you do not have to discuss each element in a vacuum. They all cross over. You DO NOT have to talk to each actor, but do not rely on the old “ensemble” fallacy, where a good ensemble means you don't have to talk to individual actors. You make the call based on the play. Many respondents begin with directorial choices to set up environments, aesthetics, climate, and mood.

### Written Responses:

For Associate Productions no written response is required. You need to submit your nominee for Irene Ryans and other student and faculty nominations you choose.

Written responses are required for ALL Participating productions in Region IV. They can be organized any way you feel comfortable, but the following prompts under each main area offer an excellent framework for a very thorough and complete response.

1. Choice of Play: Is this play appropriate for college/university production and a good choice to be advanced in the festival? List your criteria and explain how or if the production met this criteria.
2. Direction: Define the director's concept and explain whether this was viable for the play. Was it successfully and consistently realized? How was the play cast? How did the director work with actors? Did he or she illustrate adequate control over the play, create a good stage pictures, define movement, etc.?
3. Acting: Address in small casts each of the actors and in large casts, the feel of the ensemble, especially looking at technical ability, interpretation of character, ensemble performance, movement, period, dialect, etc.
4. Design Elements: Speak about whether the design elements contributed to the production. Look for artistic excellence and how the design elements functioned within the context of the play. Were these elements on the same page as directorial concept and acting choices etc.?

5. Technical Elements: How were the design elements executed? How did the show run? What improvements would help the show itself?

Written responses NEED NOT BE LENGTHY. It's better to be timely than to take months finding just the right phrase. We do appreciate well-written responses and we don't want you to feel unduly rushed or compromised in the quality of your writing, but we can't appreciate them on any level if they never arrive. Please send the two-page information sheet in within 72 hours even if the written takes a bit longer to get to the chair.

#### SPECIFICS AND PROCEDURES:

Always back what you say or write with specific choices, particular moments, transactions, colors, timing, textures, clocking, wigs. Share with the company choices and executions that may have been weak or questionable, and indicate why a choice did not work in detail. Ask questions. Expect specific answers. Create an atmosphere that encourages this exchange.

#### THE RESPONSE ASSIGNMENT

The following is a snapshot of how a typical response assignment goes from start to finish:

1. The Respondent Coordinator, Participating Entry Respondent Coordinator or the Chair of the Region will contact you about responding to a show by email or by phone.
2. Please respond as soon as you can either positively or negatively.
3. If you agree to respond, you will be sent a confirmation email that will contain the phone number and/email address of the host school and contact person, and they will be given your contact information. Although it doesn't matter who contacts whom first, the host school generally should. But don't stand on ceremony if you haven't heard from them and need to make plans.
4. Agree upon a date that you can see the show. Also agree upon potential hotel overnight stay, meals, etc. The Region will reimburse for mileage; the host school should agree to pay for at least one meal and a hotel room if the guest has traveled far. If the host school cannot afford this, it's best to decide in the initial conversation and then try to find another respondent closer by.
5. Make sure to get good directions, obtain phone information in case of an emergency, and establish an agreed upon meeting time and place.
6. Try to come in early enough for dinner, and the host school should also try to arrange a dinner with a director, designer, coordinator, etc.
7. Learn a bit about the school and its theatre program: Is there a major? Is there a big budget? Does the school have a theatre history?
8. At some point, either before or after the performance, ask if any students are ineligible for Irene Ryans or other nominations; or should be excluded for other reasons specific to the school. (The only eligibility requirement for KCACTF is the student must be enrolled at the time of performance in at least 6 credit hours). Please remind the school's director that they are also expected to make an Irene Ryan nomination and nominate any design, tech, management or dramaturgy students. It is often a good

time to let the director know they can nominate a student whose work may not have stood out for the respondent but that has undergone real growth in the rehearsal process.

9. Watch the show and take notes.

10. Give the cast a few minutes to change and get ready. You can take 15 or so minutes to collaborate with your fellow respondent in a participating response or to gather your own notes in an associate one before beginning.

11. Aim at 45 minutes to an hour if possible covering as many specific aspects of the five categories as possible.

12. Always leave room for questions.

13. Before you leave, make sure all paperwork is complete for your reimbursements with a faculty representative as agreed upon in your initial conversation. Find out when the reimbursement is likely to occur.

14. Please get the response filed within 72 hours by going online to <http://www.kcactf4.org/productions-overview/submit-responses/> and clicking on the appropriate response form.

15. Once you've completed and submitted the written response online, you will be taken to a new webpage where there is a link to submit your mileage. Region IV will reimburse mileage at \$.38/mile. Once the mileage reimbursement form is submitted, you should receive your check within two weeks.

#### Other Considerations:

1. Associate entries normally get two Irene Ryan nominations: one from the host school and one from the respondent. Participating entries get three: one from each respondent and one from the host school. Make sure you look for Barbizon and Regional Design candidates, Makeup award candidates, and even potential critics, directors, stage managers and playwrights. You can identify these people by discussing informally the regional festival and eliciting interest. Look also for faculty designers, performers, technologists, choreographers and directors worthy of special commendation.

2. Associate entries are not recommended for advancement to the regional festival.

3. Participating entries are strongly recommended, recommended, or not recommended for the festival. Do not recommend lightly. Schools with productions that are recommended will have to put together packets and apply to the regional festival. No school should be encouraged unless you as respondent are committed to recommend the show and defend this recommendation specifically.

4. If you are responding to a musical, whether as a participating or as an associate production, you can recommend a number to be brought – with no set or lighting equipment – to be presented as part of the Musical Theatre Gala performance on the closing night of the festival.

For additional information on responding contact your response coordinator or Lisa L. Abbott, Vice Chair, Region 4 at [labbott@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:labbott@georgiasouthern.edu).