

POINTERS FOR KCACTF RESPONDENTS – Region Four

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.

As a respondent you should:

1. Be 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. Respondents must create an environment that celebrates the work of these artists while giving thoughtful feedback.

2. Acknowledge that this is your individual response, it is not a definitive word: You can reduce initial tension by assuring the company that you are going to share your personal, professional experience of the production based on the one particular performance you saw. You are experiencing the production as an informed audience member, one who has an understanding of the art based on experience. To that end, you must respond to what you see, not what you expected to see. Avoid phrases such as, “What I wanted/needed to see.” Instead, use, “This is what I saw” or “This is what you presented” or even 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. **Do not redirect the work** or offer an “acting lesson”. To aid you in this, 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. Be cognizant of problems during the production. Acknowledge them and the impact on the audience’s experience. Talk about how the company responded and even brainstorm ideas on how to handle problems that can arise in a live performance.

4. Your experience as a respondent to 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. To this end, we strongly urge you to read the script prior to attending if you are not familiar with the work or the work of that playwright. If this is not possible, ask the director questions about the production. This work is especially important if you are unfamiliar with the cultural traditions behind the play. **Remember, there is no one way to create or interpret a script, and you must speak to the choices made by this company.**

5. Retain 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. However, do not dwell on your own prior work or experience with the production, keep the focus on the work you just saw.

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:

Problem Solving Method:

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; did they succeed in avoiding the traps; the types of choices made by the company (original? clear? effective?); or whether the company took risks or played it safe.

Chronological Method:

Where you detail what you 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.

RESPONSE PROMPTS

It is our goal to provide feedback that will inspire, motivate, and challenge students. Providing clear, concise, and direct statements that offer possibilities for growth without casting judgment on the choices made is paramount to the response process. The following offerings are inspired by Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process and KCACTF Region I Orientation. Please feel free to use none or all of these offerings and edit as you see fit. Remember to look through the lens of an informed audience member and be open to choices that diverge from your personal perspective; but be mindful of any assumptions, biases, and/or blindspots you might have to avoid allowing their influence on your response.

1. What 1-3 choices made a positive impact on you and moved you closer to the story? Describe with specificity the moment and its impact on you.
2. What 1-3 choices confused you and/or moved you away from the story? Describe with specificity the moment and its impact on you.
3. Ask 1-3 neutral questions that are free of judgment and provide opportunity for reflection. Examples include...
 - a. "What impact did you hope to make on the audience?"
 - b. "What feedback from this session was helpful for your continued growth?"
 - c. "What storytelling techniques did you employ that resonated the most with you?"

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. Students do not want to just hear "that was great" but at the same time can react negatively to overly harsh criticism. Consider the tone used when offering constructive criticism. You guide in your classrooms everyday, but you do not know these students as well, this is about reading the room. Make sure your critiques are specific and actionable, focus on technique rather than interpretation. Also, always think in terms of supporting their faculty, it is common for respondents to give the same notes the actors get from their directors. This is why a preshow conversation is important. You should focus your constructive criticism on technique and the resulting choices rather than on interpretation. **An interpretation of a script or a role is never wrong, it is just different.** You can talk about why a choice doesn't work for you if you focus on how the choice worked in the production.

You can often give tougher advice to a company with a strong production than one with a weak one. And you 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.

Filing a Response:

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. There is space on the form for additional comments.

Written responses are required for ALL Participating productions in Region IV. There are a set series of questions that you are asked to answer on the form. These responses are not shared with the producing institution unless you grant us permission. They are not intended to be used for faculty tenure packets. Keep in mind these written responses are a part of what helps us select productions to invite to the festival. Always ask the director if they intend on traveling the show to the festival.

SPECIFICS AND PROCEDURES: Always back what you say or write with specific examples.

Click here to access the [RESPONSE FORM](#)

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

- The Response Coordinator will send out a call for respondents with a list of productions. In Region IV we base these by state although it is not uncommon for respondents to be on more than one list, especially if you are near a border. Participating show respondents are coordinated by the Regional Chair as the selection committee is involved in those responses. For New Work the NPP chair puts out the call for respondents with specific responsibilities for new work. If you would like to be added to either of those lists, please contact the Regional Chair or the NPP Chair.
- Please respond as soon as you can either positively or negatively. Keep in mind that if your school is asking for respondents, you should be sending out an equal number to other schools.
- 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.

- 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.
- Make sure to get good directions, obtain **cell phone information** in case of an emergency, and establish an agreed upon meeting time and place.
- 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.
- 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?
- Read the play or do some background work on the playwright, style, and work if possible. This is strongly encouraged if the show is not a style or cultural approach you are familiar with.
- Watch the show and take notes.
- 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.
- Aim at 45 minutes to an hour if possible covering as many specific aspects of the five categories as possible.
- Always leave room for questions.
- After the performance meet with the director and 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 they can nominate any design, tech, management or dramaturgy students they want. 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.
- Please get the response filed within 72 hours by going online to <https://airtable.com/shruPFxr6PZj1baU0> - Make sure you correctly identify the type of response associate or participating.
- Once you've completed and submitted the written response online, please go to the [Mileage Reimbursement form](#). Region IV will reimburse mileage at \$.35/mile. Reimbursement Pay outs happen every two months.

Other Considerations:

1. **Associate** entries 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. If circumstances warrant an additional nomination or two please contact the Regional Chair to ask, usually the answer is yes especially in the case of double casts. As a respondent you need to consider student who are serving as designers, stage managers,

assistant directors, dramaturgs, vocal and dialect coaches, choreographers (dance, fight and intimacy), playwrights and PR. We are developing criteria for students whose work lifts up the RED initiative in some way. The production director can also nominate students in these areas. Respondents also nominate faculty who did exceptional work on the production.

2. **Participating entries** are considered for invitation to the regional 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. You should ask the director if they are willing to be considered for invitation and if they intend to save and store the set until selections are made.

3. 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 the regional chair at KCACTF4chair@gmail.com.