METAs

MONTREAL ENGLISH THEATRE AWARDS

Training Your Critical Eye
Seeing through the eyes of the METAs Jury

Introduction

The METAs are peer-juried awards, so the Jury's observations and discussions are at the heart of the process. Because the METAs Jury is comprised of theatre practitioners from various disciplines at various stages in their careers, each of them brings a unique theatrical voice and experience to the Jury, and therefore an important perspective to the Jury's discussions. Their critical eye is key to the integrity of this project.

What about personal taste?

Everyone has their own sense of style, their personal preferences or beliefs about the purpose of theatre (educate? entertain? engage? enlighten?) and it would be foolish to think that this doesn't play a part in how the Jury sees theatre and evaluates each production. The key is to distinguish between a personal preference and a relatively objective observation about someone else's work. It may not always be obvious, but the attempt is worthwhile.

As part of their mandate, the METAs hope to elevate the level of critical discourse about theatre in our community. Whether you are a professional practitioner or an enthusiastic theatre goer, we encourage you to read this guide, maybe even use it as a handbook, and please send us your feedback.

Please note: This document is in progress and will continue to develop over time. Though we want it to be distributed broadly, we ask that you please give credit to the METAC as its writers and rightful owners. Thank you!

Production Categories

Production

An outstanding production is not only defined by the sum of its parts. This category should raise questions as to the necessity of the piece, its outreach, the impact it will have on the community, and whether or not it was successful in speaking to its audience. What motivated the producing company to program this play? Was it meant to be socially engaged or escapist? Will it raise the bar and encourage other artists to create outstanding work?

Direction

The director is responsible for the production as a whole, and for creating a cohesive theatrical world onstage. There are obviously different styles of directing, and certain directors focus more on the actors or on the design; some lead with a subtle hand, and others put a clear stylistic stamp on each production they direct. If all of the performances and design elements are "in the same world" and telling an engaging and complete story, it is usually thanks to the director.

Some points to consider:

- Vision: intelligent, meaningful, original reading and rendering of the text;
- Blocking & staging: physical flow, how it relates to and supports the story;
- Pace & rhythm: drive, timing, transitions;
- Style & mood: realistic, poetic, comedic, cross-disciplinary influences, etc.;
- Actor's direction: inspirational, truthful, stage presence, listening quality...

Production Categories

New Text (original or adaptation)

A great play usually involves a solid plot, compelling characters, an engaging theatrical world, and a clear "voice." Questions you might want to ask yourself: Is this a story worth telling/hearing? Did the play draw me in and keep me engaged from start to finish? Were the characters' "voices" distinct and believable? Was the overall world of the play evoked clearly and consistently through the language of the characters? Did the events in the play drive the plot forward? Were there stakes? A narrative arc? Did the playwright make interesting and appropriate choices about structure? style? tone? imagery? Did the author use non-traditional sequencing of storytelling as a plot mechanism, poetry, song? Etc.

Translation

There is much debate over what makes an outstanding translation: should it stay grounded in the feel of the original language, or stand firmly in the language of translation? Since you will not be reading the original text, you will have to judge the translation on its own merits, using the same criteria as you would for a new text. Think about structural and linguistic integrity: does it hold together in terms of fluidity, clarity of ideas, level and use of language? Does it all live in the same world?

Performance Categories

Lead / Supporting Performance

Though it is possible to evaluate a performance by dissecting its technical qualities (breath, voice, diction, movement, focus, presence), an outstanding performance will often transcend our preconceived notions, surprise the spectator and elevate all aspects of the production. Generosity, intelligence, imagination, virtuosity... We all look for different things in a performance, but ultimately, it should be about selflessness: serving the piece, taking risks, raising the stakes, listening to partners and making them look good.

Questions you can ask yourself about a performance: was it believable? Was it compelling? Were the actor's choices appropriate for the character or play? If there was a clear style to the production, did the actor adhere to that style? Did the performance push the story forward? Did the actor fully inhabit the character, physically and vocally? Was the performance appropriate for the space (not too big or too small)? Did the actor engage with the other characters onstage in an appropriate way (listening, reacting, etc)?

Ensemble

For the METAs, an ensemble includes all of the performers in the play (where there is a minimum of three performers in the cast). We often say that a play has a great ensemble when the actors play many roles, or when all the performances support each other and depend on each other so that it is almost impossible to say which performance was the best. When the performances work so completely together to create one outstanding whole, that is a great ensemble.

Note about Lead Role, Supporting Role and Ensemble categories
Companies are asked to register their performers individually and to identify each performer as a Lead or Supporting Role. This is simply to guide you in your deliberations. Ultimately, the Jury reserves the right to nominate any performer as a Lead Role, Supporting Role, or as part of an ensemble, as they see fit.

Design Categories

The design of a production, on a practical level, helps to answer certain questions: Where are we? When are we? Who are these people? What is happening? But each design element can also add a sense of mood, style, and a certain sense of flair. Design can also contribute an integral element to the narrative.

Designers must collaborate, and so it can be difficult to isolate each element; a costume design must exist within the world of the set, for instance, and the set designer must consider how the set will be lit, etc. It is important to try and see the elements individually, but to also recognize that they should work together as a cohesive whole.

With each design category, it is useful to ask whether the work: A) is of a high quality, and B) helps tell the story. You should also consider production values in light of resources available. If a company can only afford to indicate an entrance by a selective detail (a gap in masking, an archway, or a difference in the lighting or a sound effect), rather than a door in a wall, was the solution appropriate and consistent with the design aesthetic? Consider also the choices of techniques and materials used, as well as the execution.

The following pages will give you more insight into specific elements of design.

Design Categories

Set Design

Set designs can be abstract, minimal, highly realistic, or anything in between, and include everything that appears physically onstage (but not worn by an actor): props, furniture, floor treatments, etc. The set designer creates the physical surroundings in which the action of the play will take place, potentially giving us clues about location, time, season, historical period, etc. The set also gives a sense of mood/atmosphere/feel and often gives insight into the overall concept of the production. The set provides space(s) for the location(s) in the text, and hopefully offers appropriate opportunities for stage movement. Like other design elements, the set should fulfill the practical needs of the script while also contributing to the flavour and spirit of this particular production.

Some questions you can ask yourself:

- Does the set serve the play? Does it allow dramatic tension, playing with different levels, shifts in space, pushing characters together or splitting them apart?
- How does the set fit onto the stage? Does it use the actual venue, the theatre walls, or does it try to create a box, an island, a delineation with the surrounding world?
- What was the set's relation to the audience? Was it a thrust Elizabethan stage or frontal Italian stage? Was there a fourth wall? How close or far were the spectators? Did the actors use the aisles or entrances in the house? Were the sightlines problematic?
- If the set was naturalistic, was it convincing? Did the set designer avoid plain realism, or did the set purposefully create the illusion of an authentic-looking, period-specific space with great attention to detail and props?
- If the set is minimalistic or metaphoric, did the chosen style broaden the themes of the play, or was it an obstacle for clarity? Were the choices bold or subtle? Helpful or distracting?

Design Categories

Costume Design

The costume designer creates the "look" for each character in the play, and adds to the overall look/feel of the theatrical world. Costumes help give us insight into who the characters are: their social status, psychological state, vocation, location, personality, etc., and can help or hinder appropriate movement. They can suggest relationships between characters, and highlight changes in age and/or state as the play progresses. A costume design can be quite naturalistic, or highly stylized. The details may be hard to spot, but a well thought out design is full of specific choices. Costumes reinforce the mood and style of the overall production, and can make a strong visual statement through shape, colour, texture and materials.

Something to keep in mind when evaluating realistic, contemporary costumes: even if the play is set in the present and the characters are wearing everyday street clothes, the costume designer probably went out of their way to find the perfect balance between what the director had in mind, what the performer wanted to wear and the common perceptions of what this type of character should be wearing. A believable naturalistic feel is often more difficult to achieve than a period look, which everyone recognizes instantly.

Design Categories

Lighting Design

Practically speaking, lighting is what allows us to see the characters (or not see them when appropriate). Lighting helps locate us in the play – it can indicate time of day and location (through shape, colour, angle, intensity, etc.), it can involve theatrical lighting fixtures or "practicals" (a lantern, a flashlight, a candle, etc.) and/or it can involve the use of gobos which delineate or texturize the space. Lighting gives a sense of form and depth to the space and also helps to shift from one location/time to another.

Artistically speaking, lighting also reinforces the style of the production; helps to create mood and atmosphere; shifts focus between scenes or within a scene (in a subtle or overt way). The lighting designer's work supports the work of the other designers as it reinforces elements that are theatrically interesting and dramaturgically important, and focuses the viewer's attention appropriately. And, like all aspects of design, it should help to move the story along.

A good lighting design is often not noticed and can even become a character in the play, but here are some variables of theatrical lighting you might learn to discern.

- Intensity & contrast: dark is also part of lighting design;
- Direction of light: coming from the top, the floor or the sides;
- Texture: use of fog or haze, gobos, patterns;
- Color: use of gels to create warm or cool hues or particular atmospheres;
- Focus: soft and diffused (Fresnel), or sharp and defined (Leko or follow spot);
- Framing & specials: using light to delineate space, just like a set;
- Quality & tone: from a soft yellow flame, to harsh blue fluorescent lighting;
- Movement: motorised lights, swinging bulbs, reflections, shadows, silhouettes;
- Practicals: fixtures, lamps, neons, or candlelight integrated in the set;
- Cueing: timing of transitions, crossfades, subtle or abrupt.

Design Categories

Sound Design and Composition

The Sound Designer is generally responsible for anything that is heard in a production. From sound effects, to transition music, to underscoring... sound can have both practical and artistic resonance. Whether it is produced live or recorded, the sound can help indicate time and location, atmosphere, a character's psychological state, etc., and is a part of the overall artistic "feel" of the production, supporting or enhancing the style or mood. The Sound Designer is also generally responsible for the acoustic quality of the space and performers' voices, when amplification is involved.

Sound Design questions to consider and discuss: Was the sound realistic or atmospheric? Did it sound like a recording or like it was played live? How effectively was the sound edited or remixed? Were certain sounds created by the performers? Was there live music? Were songs performed? If they were amplified, how balanced were the instruments and voices? How well were the microphones and speakers calibrated and positioned?

If a Composer is credited in the programme, chances are original music was written specifically for the production.

Composition questions to consider and discuss: Was the original music used to underscore scenes, or mainly for transitions? Did it fade in and out, or was it tailored for a specific timing? Was it used to trigger feeling, create atmosphere, or simply as accompaniment to a song? Were there discernable or recurring themes? Was the musical style mimicking a certain period or purposefully anachronistic? Did the music mirror, or broaden the themes of the play?

Special Contributions

Some theatrical disciplines and artistic specialties are less ubiquitous in a theatre season. The METAs requires at least three nominees to constitute an award category, but the Jury still evaluates all aspects of the registered productions, and may choose to honour them in a cross-disciplinary category, such as the Outstanding Contribution to Theatre (OCT) Award, created to recognize these rare collaborations.

Musical Direction

If music was conducted live, did it respect the rhythm and pace set by the actors and director? Did the conductor give cues, or follow them? Did the musicians play "together" with the cast? Did the musical direction do justice to the composer's score?

Video or Projection Design

From a vintage, old-school overhead projector used to create shadow puppets, to the elaborate 3D video designs of Robert Lepage, designers are constantly exploring new ways to use technology on stage. Screens first appeared as set properties (a TV set in the living room), and projections were initially used to mark transitions (with subtitles, scene numbers or dates projected on the set). Video and multimedia have since evolved to become scenic elements in their own right - and not just in rock concerts. Entire sets can now be projected on multiple levels (not only backgrounds, colours and textures) and projectors are often used as lighting sources, combining movement and abstract images to create atmosphere. You should evaluate video and projection design as you would any other design element, but also, ask yourself how the passive media was able to interact and evolve with the live performance.

Special Contributions

Other Rare Disciplines

Other elements that may be included in the Outstanding Contribution to Theatre category could be (but not exclusively):

- Live musical performance
- Choreography
- Movement coaching
- Fight choreography
- Make-up design
- Puppet design
- Properties design
- Dialect coaching
- Chorus work
- Special effects
- Graphic design (for an outstanding poster or programme)
- or any other outstanding element for which a person has received credit.

For all of the above, what really matters is that the artist(s) are on the same page as their collaborators, and share a vision and understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Are the results integral to the dramaturgy of the production? Do they harmonize with the other scenic elements? Did they add to your comprehension, or were they superficial, imposed, distracting? Did they help convey meaning? Did they take you further into the world of the play?

Emerging Artists

Emerging Artist(s) – Performance

An "Emerging Artist" is someone in the early stages of their career who graduated from a training institution within the past 5 years, or who has been doing theatre professionally for less than 5 years. It does not denote someone who has recently switched disciplines within theatre (e.g. an established playwright who decides to start acting after having published plays for 20 years). This award is specifically designed to recognize performers who have yet to reach their full potential, but are making an impression creating quality work and are worth keeping an eye on for the future.

Emerging Artist(s) – Production

This category was established to honour the emerging artists who work behind the scenes or away from the spotlight. Think of writers, directors and designers, and any emerging talents you thought were outstanding, even though they were not visibly part of the performance.