

# Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Margo Jefferson

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*Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. Anne Hamilton is the producer and host. You may listen to the podcasts and read the transcripts at [www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com](http://www.hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com)*



## Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! Interview with Margo Jefferson, Theatre and Cultural Critic (Season 3, Episode 3, Recorded June 26, 2012)

Anne Hamilton: Welcome to Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow! This is a podcast series featuring some of the most exciting women artists working in the theatre today. I'm your host, Anne Hamilton. Today, our guest is Margo Jefferson. Miss Jefferson is a Pulitzer Prize-winning cultural critic who wrote about books, theatre, and the arts for *The New York Times* for 13 years. Her writing has also appeared in *Bookforum*, *Salon*, *The Nation*, *The Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Vogue*, and *Newsweek*, among other publications. Her book *On Michael Jackson* was published by Pantheon in 2005 and Vintage in 2006. And the essay she wrote on Michelle Obama, "Movin' On Up", was published in *Best African American Essays: 2010*. She also wrote and performed SIXTY MINUTES IN NEGROLAND at The Cherry Lane Theater and The Culture Project. Welcome, Margo.

Margo Jefferson: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

AH: I am fascinated with your work as a journalist, and someone who influences our thoughts and our ideas on what's going on in the culture at large. Could you tell us how you started doing that?

MJ: Do you mean officially?

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AH: Yes.

MJ: You know, I started in a kind of predictable way of being a beat reviewer. My first published piece was actually about rock n' roll and race and all of that. And that probably was my first real attempt at cultural criticism. And that, I published in 1971 in Harper's. After that, my first official writing job was at *Newsweek* as mostly a book critic. And, you know, magazines and newspapers worked that way. You're a beat person. By the time I got to the *Times*, I had taught a lot, I freelanced a lot and that part of me that had always been very engaged by the arts and their relationship to each other was getting a little restless.

So I found myself at the *Times*, where I went in 1993, often writing about books that had to do with artist's biographies, with books of cultural criticism, books almost as vehicles for other kinds of art and thought. I didn't, for example, do as much fiction as I would have years ago. I really was interested in the book as a kind of lead into these other worlds of critical thought and art.

Then, I became the Sunday theatre critic. And then, I was so interested in how what we think of as political culture, and social culture can be mapped against and through the so-called pure art. And I was so interested in how art forms were influencing each other. You know, you couldn't do theatre in those days - you still can't - if you didn't, for better and for worse, know movies. At this point, theatre is practically cannibalizing movies, but with any kind of experimental theater, you have to know performance art, you should know some dance, - you know, all of that, and music. And these were passions of mine.

So, I just got very interested in the dynamics of how art forms and genres rise and fall and influence each other, but also take their place in the culture as important. And then I got interested in why some art forms are central to the culture, at certain times and why others fade in importance. What happens if a genre is coming back? Why? All of these things are enormous questions. And I like questions at least as much as answers, which is also probably why I moved into this kind of mobile intellectual and cultural world.

AH: It's never ending.

MJ: Never. Indeed. That's right. And, you know, the older you get, the more aware you or I become. I become more and more aware that it's tempting and easy to settle with what you know best. You have to keep testing yourself and that means being willing to look not very knowledgeable, maybe to look a little foolish, to have to retool, relearn. So, that's a challenge I didn't really think about when I was very young.

AH: What were you writing about the year that you won the Pulitzer Prize?

MJ: I was still a book critic and I was just making the move to theatre. So I got it really for a body of my book pieces and a few others. I'd done a long piece for Arts and Leisure on comedy. And I would range from Vaudeville to Amos 'n Andy to Rosanne so, it was [about] the structures of popular comedy in America, the comedy of race, the comedy of gender, the comedy of class. And I was proud that that also was submitted to the Pulitzer Committee. I was still doing mostly books then.

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AH: When you were growing up, did you take part in many artistic activities?

MJ: Yes, in that way that middle class girls do. But fortunately it *took* for me. My parents really did love the arts, so they took us to everything - opera, jazz, ballet, modern, Marcel Marceau, you name it. And my sister and I both had ballet and piano lessons from an early age. My mother found us really good teachers. It turned out that Denise, my sister who later became the Director of the Alvin Ailey School for many years, her talent was dance. Mine was music. But we each had to take these [lessons] until a certain age. We loved that. And I think because we went to so many cultural things, they were glamorous. Also I have to say in those days, it was probably easier for a girl to dream about being an artist if the art form involved performing.

Your dreams were safer as a girl if it was singing, rather than composing; [also] if it was piano, if you were going to be an instrumentalist rather than, let's say, a trumpet [player]. [Laughter] There were many models for that, glamorous and glorious models. Oh, writing, too. I always wrote "well". I didn't really think about writing in my youth. I took it for granted that I did it well. But when I got involved there was a long history of women writers, so that was good.

AH: Did you grow up here in New York?

MJ: I grew up in Chicago, Illinois, and it served me well. Though, again, I did always want to come to New York. And to me, my God, this was the center of arts. It was the center of a varied culture. Chicago had a strong white arts culture, and Bronzeville, which is a great black cultural center. But New York did have Harlem, as well as Greenwich Village and a vast global culture. So, yes, I wanted to be here.

AH: You're teaching now at Columbia University.

MJ: I'm in the School of the Arts, in the nonfiction section of their writing program. Their writing program is fiction, poetry, and nonfiction. And I'm in nonfiction. That concentration is headed by Phillip Lopate, so I'm there in the graduate and undergraduate [divisions].

AH: Do you enjoy teaching?

MJ: Yes, I do. I've done it since the '70s, usually once a year or once a semester. So I had time to realize I genuinely did like it. It keeps your brain sharp. I spoke at the beginning about being challenged as you get older by new kinds of thoughts and technology. Teaching does keep you attuned to that. You have to be on top of that. You have to be at least open to it. So I do.

AH: How do you structure your writing time and your teaching time?

MJ: Well, that's tricky, semester by semester, depending on, if it's a new course. However, my basic principle, over the years has evolved to: I do a certain number of hours of writing in the morning to early afternoon, and then, in the afternoon I will do class preparation which is, from reading [my students'] work, to reading the work I'm teaching, to inventing a new course. I don't write well in the evening. I can research or read, and I can do some schoolwork. But I like to go out. You know, we like to see things and have fun in the evening, but if I have to, that's what I do.

There are times, of course, when, you know, you miss some writing days and then the muscles get a

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little stiff so you have to make it up. I once audited, and it was fascinating, a playwriting course with Adrienne Kennedy and she used to say, just in her very forthright way, she used to say, "Did you write something last week? And you can't always, but she's absolutely right in that, if you don't, the mind that is the muscle. as Yvonne Reiner calls it, it's stiff and you have to work it back.

AH: Wow. Do you have one artistic approach to what you write or does it come to you differently?

MJ: Well, your approach when you're a journalist is always somewhat shaped by the practical, which is the amount of time you have, to think and feel your way into a piece and the amount of space you have. So, allowing for that, [for] my process with my kind of traditional, critical [work], let's say - reviews and essays rather than a book - I try to operate on at least two fronts. One - let's say I'm writing about maybe a play, a period piece. It's the utterly irrational sensory experience that I had which I've tried to take notes on, and also just let go through my mind.

Then there's the research that I've done, and it's called the scholarly, or the intellectual background. Then there's in-the-moment, post-experience analysis, and those are the numbers of ideas that partly you're prepared for by your studies, but they partly just come to you. You make a connection, and then there's the putting together, in the writing, of the sensory, the critical, and the, let's say, the analytical, [which is the] least scholarly part. The thing that's so dreadful is to fall into the same habits which when you're writing, let's say, the same length or the same amount of time. It can easily happen even though the pieces are different. So, I like to believe that each work of art or each artist requires a slightly different formal approach, and tone, of course is everything.

I remember an art critic who was in an exercise class that I once took. We both wrote about the same show. It involved a lot of installation art and she said, "Well, this is so interesting." She said, "We tended to have similar opinions, but you approached it so differently." And I said, "Well, my God. I absolutely have to. I'm not an art scholar or art critic. I'm the visual art equivalent of Virginia Woolf's common reader."

I'm intelligent. I have a general background, but I'm an informed amateur and that's what I came to it with and that's how I'm writing. Give me a field that I think I'm far more trained in, and my approach will be somewhat different. So, that kept things very interesting for me, [as I was] changing my position, adapting a slightly different role, persona, position, in the landscape. And that, I just carried on into my first book and the book I'm working on now, trying to stay mobile in tone and approach.

AH: What happens when you're writing a theatre review and perhaps you've become emotional about it or parts, of the show are just not gelling in your mind and you're under a deadline. What do you do then?

MJ: Oh God, it's just awful. [Laughter] And it happens. You can do a couple of things, depending again on how raw it feels or [whether I'm thinking], "Oh my God" or, "I'm having trouble controlling my emotions, I'm feeling so vehemently about this." It could be, "I am confused, [Chuckle] I don't know where I'm going." Depending on that, I try to pull back and question myself, you know, doing a little talking here: "Why do you think you're responding so violently? Take some notes on this and see what's happening and see if you can find some trail of bread crumbs that will be a revelation." If that doesn't work, then I try to use my reactions as questions, to make them questioning reflections. It acknowledges, essentially, to the reader, "You know, I'm, unsettled about

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this. I've found myself *feeling* this, but *thinking* that." Why is that? [I ask myself.] What about the work is doing that? You can make it part of the piece. You really can.

The worst thing that happens, is [that] something comes up, some complexity - and it's usually intellectual and emotional - that you just can't quite solve within that space of time and, at worst, you have to get the piece done. I find I will have to pull back from that, make the piece a little simpler, and go back to it in some other form, [Laughter] with another piece. That's the least preferable, but I'm not going to lie and say I haven't had to do that sometimes under pressure of deadline. Ideally, you can make it a part of a question. And I came to believe, over the years of writing partly, because as you astutely asked that question, this would happen -- that vulnerability can be as interesting as traditional critical authority. You know, as long as it's clearly and honestly expressed, vulnerability is very interesting in a critic.

AH: It's a very practical profession, doing theatre criticism or cultural criticism.

MJ: Yes, that's true. At its worst there's a kind of toxic pride in it: "I'm holding forth. I'm improving the culture." At its best, I think we can have a kind of idealistic ambition: "I'm opening things up. I'm making a space for more questions, more feelings, more art and entertainment [Chuckles] to flourish and to be out there. I'm adding to the conversation."

AH: Do you have a favorite art form to write about?

MJ: No, it shifts around. I was dying to write about theatre when I was writing about books, because, you know, I'd done it for so long. It wasn't that I didn't love literature, but I'd been a book critic [for a long time]. I think writing about performance was thrilling to me. It still is because of all those elements. But practically, I found that I was writing about many more works, because the beat required that, that I didn't really care for or didn't have a great deal of interest in. When I was a book critic, I had much more room to choose the book I wanted to write about.

So I would say those kinds of, practical questions, practical matters for a journalist, are very much affecting [her output]. I also chose to write about dance and fashion. I wrote very often about music. So, you know, it's really what work is pulling me in. The thing about writing about any kind of literature, including theatrical, is the way your words can play against and with the words of the writer. The pleasure's in the last note. Art's based not only on the verbal. [It's] finding a language for sound, for rhythm, for pacing, for gesture.

AH: I studied theatre criticism when I was at Columbia and one of the biggest challenges was to realize that as a critic, I was responsible to deal with all aspects of the piece, and that I had to develop new eyes and a new vocabulary.

MJ: I absolutely agree, that was the scariest thing when I was getting started to write about theatre. As you were reading, historically, who did you end up admiring particularly?

AH: I actually liked um, Granville Barker's essays. I liked Frank Rich's work, as I was going through. Michael Feingold, of course, is a master. He's the best, I think.

MJ: Yeah. He's so knowledgeable in that role.

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AH: Well, I thank you so much for your time, and for letting us know more about your creative process. I have really enjoyed learning what goes on behind the scenes of your columns and books.

You have been listening to [Hamilton Dramaturgy's TheatreNow!](#) We have been speaking today with Margo Jefferson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Theatre and Cultural Critic. You may read a transcript of this interview and download this podcast on our website, which is [hamiltondramaturgys theatrenow.com](#). The podcast is also available on Soundcloud. Our theme was composed by Nancy Ford. Otto Bost is the Sound Designer. Our US Program Assistants are Cate Cammarata and Walter Chon. Our UK Program Assistant is Natalie Pandya. Helaine Gawlica is our Archivist and Web Designer. I am Anne Hamilton, your Producer and Host. Thank you for listening.

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