Report Evaluating the Critical Response Process

by Kate Symondson

Liz Lerman describes the Critical Response Process (CRP) as 'a method for getting useful feedback on anything you make.' This report evaluates the utility and efficacy of the Critical Response Process based upon the experience of attending six workshops organised by The Opera Group, and participating in six feedback sessions following each workshop.

This evaluation considers the various roles of the participants, the type of work responded to, the prior knowledge of participants (of one another, of the CRP, of the work), and the structure of CRP. It concludes with suggestions for how to successfully implement the Critical Response Process.

The Participants

The Artist

CRP is tailored for and around the artist. Lerman writes that, for CRP to be of potential use to the artist, they need to 'be at a point where they can question their work in a somewhat public environment.' 'The Process,' she continues, 'is most fruitful when artists are invested in the future evolution of the art they are showing, or at least in the possibility that they can learn something of value to apply to future projects.' In other words, the artist not only needs to be ready for CRP, they have to posses a certain amount of faith in the system itself.

The CRP sessions that are the subject of this report were conducted in tandem with The Opera Group's January workshops. The director for each workshop, for each production, was Frederic Wake-Walker; he was the artist in attendance for all the CRP sessions. Other artists in attendance varied. In *Gloria* the performers and music director attended the feedback. In *Lost in Thought*, performers left, leaving only the composer, Rolf Hind, in attendance. In *Paradise*, the librettist (Dave Windass) and three cast members attended. *The Mother* had the most comprehensive attendance, including the composer, librettist, various vocal performers, and the dramaturg. In Ergo Phizmiz's session, the composer and an actor remained for feedback. The final workshop, *Folie a Deux*, only had the lighting designer (Dan Large). The instigator of the CRP for each session was, therefore, Wake-Walker, the director. There was a sense, then, that those other artists and performers in attendance had had the CRP session imposed upon them, rather than initiating the session themselves.

This had an evident impact upon artists' and performers' experience of the CRP sessions. Rolf Hind (composer of *Lost in Thought*) later reported that he 'was initially very sceptical of the process, having seen it in use before and found it rather unhelpful.' Responders taking part in his CRP session, however, were overwhelmingly positive of their experience of his piece, which, given some of the negative feedback he'd received from other (non-responding) attendees, he 'appreciated.' On the whole, however, Hind's example is important for demonstrating the need to have the artist be the initiator of CRP, and not to impose CRP upon an artist. Though appreciative of the responders' positive feedback, he felt that that's 'probably just me being artificially confirmed in my rightness though;' he was at a stage in his work where he was fairly

indifferent and impervious to the feedback or input of others, whether positive or negative. The abstract and immersive nature of the work itself, he concluded, rendered the whole idea of feedback and structured discussion 'a bit moot/ ironic.' Hind's session not only demonstrates the need for the artist to instigate the session, but that the artist must feel that the work might benefit or be progressed in some way by CRP.

CRP was found to be better suited to the artists (composers, librettists, directors and so on) than it was the performers (actors, singers, musicians). In certain instances, performers felt uncomfortable by the relatively unexplained presence of so many unknown observers. This might have a negative impact upon the workshop, and did little to create the safe environment that Lerman intends with the CRP. In *Gloria*, for instance, Jessica Walker (performer) voiced her discomfort at not having been introduced to any of the responders, and said that she felt far from 'safe' or 'comfortable' in the responding environment. Recalling this discomfort in written feedback following the session, she wrote that 'it was not up to the performers to have the CRP session. If the CRP session is to be useful to artists, it needs to be something that they have specifically asked to engage with.' She added that 'the director might have learned something from the process,' but this, she felt, was because he was 'an outsider, in that he is not performing.' Walker reiterates the need to have artist-instigated CRP, and suggests that the process may be inherently more beneficial to an artist than to a performer.

The Facilitator

Lerman writes that 'much of the success of a good Critical Response session lies with the facilitator.' In the course of our CRP sessions, we discovered that the success of the session depends, in large part, more upon the role of the facilitator than it does the structure of the CRP. In the earlier sessions, the facilitator – Maia Mackney – strictly and consistently adhered to the four-step structure. Given that we were scrutinising the process, this type of control was deemed necessary for a fair evaluation. This meant that, in numerous instances, the facilitator was required to truncate what seemed like "natural" discussions, and enforce a return to the structure and regulation of the CRP. This was often a discomforting experience for numerous of the participants (the facilitator included), and was felt, at times, to be a counter-productive measure with a negative effect.

In the final session (*Folie a Deux*), however, the director (Wake-Walker) and facilitator (Mackney) agreed to relax the structure of the CRP and allow the facilitator more autonomy over the process. This session was felt, by the director, to have been the most successful overall. Whilst there were a variety of contributing factors for this (which will be covered and discussed over the course of this report), it is worth noting here that the role of the facilitator was most effective once a more symbiotic understanding had developed between artist and facilitator. Under these circumstances, the facilitator could afford to relax the rigid structure of the CRP, and conduct and direct the session most effectively on the artist's behalf. In this more autonomous role, the facilitator was able to impose the structure of CRP when expediency dictated. The facilitator's interjections, within this freer circumstance, were no longer experienced as a means of keeping the rigid structure of CRP in place, but rather, as a means of avoiding some of the negative aspects that can accompany free discussion. This will be covered in greater depth in the section that discusses the structure of the CRP.

The Responders

Lerman's guidelines for the selection of responders are broad and vague. She writes that 'responders can be friends or strangers, peers or public, experts or novices, all depending on choice or circumstance. Whoever they are, it is important that these observers sincerely want this artist to make excellent work.' Our experience of practising CRP with The Opera Group, however, has taught that selection of responders plays a significant part in engineering the success of the session, and more prescriptive guidelines (at least for responding to new opera) ought to be instated.

Variety is key to the selection of responders. The success of the final session (*Folie a Deux*) owed, in part, to the fact that responders included a broad cross-section of professionals from the industry. The aspect of the piece workshopped in this session was solely that of the lighting. Responders included creatives, producers, technicians, and academics. There were those who had some prior knowledge of the piece, and those who had worked with the piece's creators in the past. Conversely, there were those who had no knowledge or professional experience of either. This variety of responders elicited a breadth of response, ranging from the purely technical, to those that focused purely on their abstract experience. The group of responders was also relatively small, which allowed for more opportunity to build upon ideas and to develop particular lines of thought and discussion. In sessions with a large number of responders, the structure of CRP was difficult for the facilitator to uphold, and the negative aspects of free discussion tended to take over (discussion, for e.g., became either over-focused or circuitous, and increasingly unhelpful for the artist or the work). This less wieldy group allowed the facilitator greater control over the structure, and provided her with the opportunity to experiment with a more flexible, relaxed version of the Critical Response structure.

The Work

Liz Lerman writes that 'the product may be at any stage of its development' for the CRP to be effective. This, however, was not found to be the case in our experience of CRP with The Opera Group. The sessions that were felt to be less successful (by the artists and the director) were mainly those where the piece was at a more developed or fixed stage of creation. Rolf Hind wrote that prior to the process, he didn't 'really think the work's structure and content need[ed] much refinement.' Though he found the session more 'interesting' than he'd anticipated, ultimately, it contributed nothing to the progression or development of the work. Conversely, Dave Windass, the librettist for *Paradise*, felt that the CRP was useful owing to the fact that 'still being in the early stages of development both myself and the director were very open to ideas.' A work in its development stage may benefit more, as an artist may be more equivocal and open to suggestion.

There were, however, some more complex considerations that emerged as a result of these workshops. Jessica Walker (*Gloria*), felt that the 'process is better suited to the workshopping of a devised work, or the work in the midst of composition.' She explains that '*Gloria* is a piece in its complete form, and the artists were workshopping potential physical approaches to that piece. Given that the responders don't know the piece, I'm not sure that outside input is useful at this stage.' It was unhelpful, then, for the responders to be responding to a complete piece, but especially in this vulnerable

and somewhat abstract stage of production. Geoffrey Paterson, the music director for *Gloria*, also felt that *what* is witnessed by the responders can significantly warp their impression or understanding of that work. Paterson was careful to point out that, depending on whether they were witnessing a devised piece or developing a performance of a pre-existing work, responders might be 'witnessing the process of developing an interpretation of a work which they probably have no knowledge of, but which at root dictates the content and emphasis of what they witness, even at an early "workshop" stage.' 'In other words,' he clarifies, 'the fundamental component of what they are being asked to respond to is in fact invisible to them.' This was certainly an issue in the workshops that presented a piece that appeared to be in its complete form, with the inclusion of performers, musicians, and so on. For the artists, performers, and musicians, it was evident that they were still at the stage of workshopping approaches to the eventual performance of the piece. For responders, however, without any other (or prior) knowledge of the work, it is tempting to regard the piece being workshopped as the final product.

The director (and initiator of the CRP) took certain measures, that, to some extent, helped to guard against this. In addition to asking responders to respond the piece itself, he was keen that they ought also to respond to the process of the workshop. In principle, this might have proved an effective way of avoiding unhelpful or inaccurate fixation and commentary upon the abstracted piece. In practice, however, responders who were not from the industry were not confident in commenting upon "processes" that they felt they could not engage with in any professional or expert capacity. And in the case of industry experts, interest in the piece itself often eclipsed any inclination to comment upon the process.

Closely related to these concerns is the question of prior knowledge: how much ought the participants know of one another, of the Critical Response Process and structure, and of the work, prior to the workshop and feedback session?

Prior Knowledge

In some of the workshops, the lack of prior introduction between performers and responders led to some performers feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious during the workshop. Jessica Walker (*Gloria*) reflected that 'more information needs to be shared in advance, if this process is genuinely meant as a "safe space" for performers.' Another performer in the same session, however, preferred the anonymity, arguing that the 'anonymity helped.' Had he realised that certain individuals from the industry (who were familiar to him by reputation) were observing him, it would've deeply affected the way in which he worked. There were certain advantages of not introducing the responders and the participants prior to the process. It helped, to some extent, to create the illusion that the workshop was not being presented to an audience, and encouraged artists and performers to behave as they would unobserved. The director (Wake-Walker) elected in nearly all workshops to direct the work at a right angle from the observers. Similarly, this meant that none of the participants were tempted to think of the responders as the audience and helped, in some ways, to present the workshop as a work in progress rather than a performance.

At the beginning of each CRP session, our facilitator explained and mapped the Critical Response Process in detail. In her book, Liz Lerman describes how, 'as CRP has evolved, we've come to spend more time explaining the steps and sequences before

starting the Process, even before experiencing the work under consideration. Knowing what to expect and how each step supports the succeeding ones help participants to make better use of the Process.' In each of our sessions, we had at least a few responders and participants who had no prior knowledge of the CRP. Giving them, a lengthy explanation of CRP, however, (and so soon after their experience of a workshop) was, for many, overwhelming, not to mention somewhat intimidating. It automatically established CRP as limited; as counter-intuitive for a natural critical response; as something one could "get wrong." Further on, I'll discuss the advantages of relaxing the structure of CRP. Here, however, suffice to say that the less information one supplies of CRP before the feedback session, the more relaxed the participants were in their approach to the session. By only supplying artists and responders with a basic outline of the process – introducing each stage as it occurs – this helps to set the tone for freer discussion and avoids presenting CRP as restrictive and over determined.

The director intentionally supplied no information (other than the working title) of each work to responders in advance of the workshop and feedback session. Most responders (bar the odd one), then, experienced the workshop "blind." This has a significant impact upon how one responds. One advantage of this is that the responders tend to focus initially upon their abstract experience, rather than their intellectual response to a piece. The director found it especially interesting to see what drew responders' attention in this relatively "blind" context. Another advantage is that a responder might then be more inclined to comment on the process, which the director was keen to shift attention to. As discussed earlier, however, most responders (both from the industry and otherwise) didn't lean towards this focus, and tended instead to fixate upon the work itself. As a result, the lack of knowledge could then prove distracting and unproductive for the session, particularly during neutral questions, where responders would fixate upon trying to find out what the work was "about," and to supply their abstract experience with some sense of meaning. This has the disadvantage of shifting the emphasis from the artist's needs to those of the responders.

The most effective approach toward this question of "prior knowledge" was found to be one that combined "blind" initial responses with the later supplication of information. Responders would watch the workshop with no information of the piece (of the narrative, concept, or artists' vision) and initially respond according more to their experience than their intellectual response. Then, at a stage determined by the artist, responders would be given more detailed explanation and elucidation of the piece, and would then be able to respond in a more complex and intellectually engaged way.

The Structure

One of the greatest and most consistent challenges that CRP presented to all participants was the apparent rigidity of the four-step structure. The responding session for *The Mother* especially highlighted the difficulty of maintaining the CRP structure when the passions of individuals and momentum/ force of discussion takes hold.

This session had a large number of participants (both artists, performers, and responders), and the majority of responders had extensive experience and authority in the industry. A combination of enthusiasm, subjectivities, and personalities, led to a lack of deference for the Critical Response structure and a preference for the

momentum of conversation. At times during this session the structure was intentionally broken with, as certain responders were allowed to offer opinions during neutral questions. Mostly, however, the four-steps were abandoned or forgotten, as the natural discussion took over, and un-permissioned opinions and fix-its seeped into the general exchange.

Liz reasons that certain frustrations are actually diffused by the process, and the knowledge that one can return to ideas and opinions at a later stage: 'Responders who know they will have a chance to express opinions by the end will experience the rigor of the earlier steps as stimulating rather than limiting. If participants follow the sequence of steps with a little patience, mutual respect naturally emerges.' Whilst the facilitator attempted to reinstate the structure at certain points during *The Mother* response session (as per Lerman's advice), this didn't combat the pervasive sense that the structure was unnatural, and that the conversation had been frustrated. Across the six CRP sessions, responders tended to react to a work with great interest, with passion, and found it difficult to purge their neutral questions of these enthusiasms. Others found it hard not to follow a line of thought through immediately, which was similarly frustrating for the artist, who usually wished to complete an exchange, rather than have to experience it in disrupted, disconnected segments.

There were other complaints relating to the structure. The majority of artists felt that responses were limited to being too safe, and would've welcomed a more direct and challenging approach from responders. Dave Windass (*Paradise*) thought that there was 'a level of politeness and decorum that stopped the CRP team short of offering some difficult provocations and a tough line of questioning.' Similarly, reflecting upon his experience of all six sessions, Freddy Wake-Walker felt that responders could've been granted more opportunity to be challenging. Lerman advises that Statements of Meaning ought to be 'framed in a positive light.' Wake-Walker felt, however, that given that the artist is not expected to respond directly to any of these statements, this takes a certain pressure off and naturally engineers a 'safe' environment for the artist. Responders could, therefore, offer more controversial statements of meaning, without disconcerting the artist. Towards the end of the workshop series, Wake-Walker decided to abandon the formality of permissioned opinions; responders were simply allowed to offer an opinion without awkwardly having to ask to first. Perhaps the need for permissioned opinions is important in other contexts, and to other artists, but in the sessions with The Opera Group, artists were sufficiently confident with their work and their vision to be unthreatened by negative or unhelpful criticism.

Liz Lerman is by no means oblivious to these reactions to the CRP's structure, and refers throughout her book to its perceived 'unnaturalness' and 'limitations.' Rather than insisting upon the structure absolutely, Lerman encourages a certain amount of experimentation and tailoring for the artist's and work's particular needs. 'Once familiar with its basic principles,' she states, 'users often begin to experiment with the CRP process. We encourage people to adapt the Process to their needs; this is a living, breathing thing, not a code of conduct to be practices in an orthodox way.' Similarly, she writes that 'setting the stage for CRP is less a matter of following a set method, and more about considering a range of options and finding an approach that fits the artist, the group, and the setting.' Lerman condones, therefore, a certain amount of flexibility. Her advice for adapting the CRP, however, focuses more on adding more stages after the four-step process, or considering different contexts that they might be used in, than it does on adjusting or re-evaluating the steps themselves.

Dave Windass (*Paradise*) suggested that CRP is most useful as 'a catalyst for conversations between artists.' In the session that evaluated the CRP method, however, it was felt that, until the structure was relaxed, there was no sense of having a 'conversation' at all. CRP is most effective when the artist (in collaboration with the facilitator) feels they have the autonomy to adapt and relax the order and elements of the four-step structure.

Contrasting the feedback sessions for *The Mother* and *Folie a Deux* is helpful for considering how to make the structure work.

There were too many responders at *The Mother*. This meant that the group was significantly unwieldy and therefore unmanageable. It became difficult and awkward for the facilitator to interpose, as more and more individuals weighed in on certain circuitous, overly focused and, ultimately, unhelpful discussions. The intention for this session had been to maintain a tight CRP structure. Participants therefore broke the structure (both consciously and accidentally) before it was relaxed, resulting in the feeling that the session was more participant-led than it was facilitator or structure-led. Ultimately, this led to the sense that the discussion was "out of control."

The group of participants for *Folie a Deux* was significantly smaller, comprising of two artists and around nine responders. The decision to relax the CRP structure had been made in advance of the session, and the facilitator had developed an accord with and understanding of the artist, which is crucial for upholding the artist's needs in a relaxed version of CRP. The overarching four-step structure was roughly maintained, but the facilitator allowed for free exchange within. Opinions didn't require permission, and discussion was more expressive than neutral, more natural than regimented. It was important not to abandon the structure entirely, but rather to impose or relax it according to expediency. One of the primary advantages of the CRP structure is that it prevents the session from becoming about the preoccupations and subjective concerns of the responders. If a strong personality or a personal fixation threatens to dominate the discussion, or to lead it in an unhelpful or circuitous direction, then the structure provides the facilitator with an inoffensive excuse for redirecting the discussion. The director (Wake-Walker) said that it was not so much the answers to the artist's questions that were of importance, it was the formulating of the questions that was of most use. The structure is also helpful, then, not only for safeguarding against unhelpful discussion, but for eliciting the hitherto unarticulated or unidentified ideas and concerns of the artist.

Concluding Remarks

For CRP to be successful, it must be initiated by the artist. During our sessions, CRP was most effective in a relaxed form. For this relaxed form to be successfully imposed and managed, the facilitator needs to have a certain symbiosis with the artist. The facilitator must act on behalf of the artist, imposing the four-steps when a discussion becomes unhelpful for progressing the work, and relaxing it to facilitate a natural, potentially productive conversation.

[*See next page for practical advice*]

Practical Advice for Using the Critical Response Process

First, some considerations for the participants:

The Artist

The Critical Response Process (CRP) is developed around the artist. It is, crucial, therefore that it is the artist who initiates the process, it can't be imposed upon them.
This process tends to be more useful for the creatives (the composers, writers, and so on), than it is for the performers.

The Facilitator

The efficacy of the session depends, in some ways, more upon the role of the facilitator than it does the structure of the CRP.

- The facilitator can be the 'fall guy' for the artist; they take the pressure off the artist in the truncating and redirection of certain conversations. They can ensure that the feedback is constructive and relevant, and can guard against rambling, circuitous, overly-narrow, or self-serving responses/ discussions. It is essential that the facilitator and the artist communicate before the CRP session, so that the facilitator can work most effectively on behalf of the artist in the feedback session.
- The facilitator has to be prepared to stop what seems like a natural discussion. This role might, at times, feel counter-productive and uncomfortable. To combat that feeling, however, it's important to think of these interjections not as a means for keeping the rigid structure of CRP in place, but to avoid the negative aspects that accompany free discussion.

The Responders

Variety is key in the selection of responders:

- Creatives, Producers, and Technicians
  People from the industry are undoubtedly the most insightful and constructive contributors, but ensure that your selection includes a range of professions and areas of expertise within that bracket.
- Non-Expert Participants
  Including individuals who are not from the industry can be an effective way of gauging a sense of how an audience will respond to your work. It is worth noting, however, that this may not be as effective for a work being workshopped in its early stages, but more useful for the showcasing of an advanced piece.
- Prior Knowledge
  It can be helpful to have both responders that have some knowledge of the work (its content, vision, narrative) and responders that have no prior knowledge of the work (who watch it "blind"). Those with prior knowledge can engage with the work on a more intimate, detailed level. Whereas those who don't have prior knowledge can offer unique and fresh insight on the process of the workshop, and the abstract experience of the piece.
  Similarly, having responders who have had experience of working with the artist before, and those who have not, provides an important and interesting balance.

Smaller groups allow for a more focused, more productive discussion:

- With fewer people, there is more opportunity to build upon ideas and to develop particular lines of thought and discussion.
- A less wieldy group allows for greater control over the structure, and provides more opportunity for a flexible, relaxed utilisation of the CRP.

Some considerations for the setting up of a CRP session:

Prior Knowledge

Decide what prior knowledge you would like your responders to have of the piece, as this can have a profound impact upon how they receive the work and respond to it. It might be helpful to hear initial responses without giving any explanation of the work (so, "blind"), and then to pause the feedback session to provide more information (of the narrative, concept, vision).

Introducing CRP

Our most effective sessions were those where we relaxed the structure of CRP. If you plan to do the same, then the facilitator might consider giving artists and responders only a basic outline of the structure in advance of the feedback (rather than a detailed description of the whole process). Introduce each stage only as it occurs; this will set the tone for freer discussion and will avoid presenting the process as restrictive and overly determined.

Depending on the nature of the work, a break between the workshop and the feedback may be more productive. Some works will benefit from time for reflection, others, however, benefit more from more immediate response.

The Critical Response Session:

How Critical Can I Be?

Statements of Meaning:

- Whilst Liz Lerman advises that these should be 'framed in a positive light,' our artists felt that statements could be more challenging, provocative, controversial. Given that the artist is not expected to respond directly to any of these statements, this takes a certain pressure off, naturally engineering a safe environment.

Opinions and Fix-Its:

- Like the 'Statements of Meaning,' Liz Lerman's system advocates for a soft, cautious approach; responders have to ask permission to offer opinions, as well as "fix-its". During our sessions, however, it was felt that to be engaged in the CRP, the artist had to be at a confident, assured stage of his production. Opinions and Fix-its, therefore, posed little "threat" to the artist's work or vision. Artists were open to (as with the statements) more provocative opinions and solutions.

Making the Structure Work

The apparent rigidity of the structure feels, for many, an unnatural and a counter-intuitive way to respond to a work of art. There are, however, definite advantages of applying to this structured method of response, and certain means of naturalising it:

- Relax the structure. If you present creatives with a rigid structure, they instinctively want to break it. By introducing the CRP step by step, rather than in detail prior to the session, you construct fewer barriers and communicate a level of fluidity. The structure ought to be imposed or relaxed according to expediency. The facilitator should keep an effective symbiosis with the artist throughout the session, interpreting and implementing the course of action most helpful for the progression of the work.
- Use the structure to prevent strong personalities from dominating the session. One of the primary advantages of CRP is that it stops the session from becoming about the preoccupations and subjective concerns of the responders. If a strong personality or personal fixation threatens to dominate the discussion, or lead it in an unhelpful or circuitous direction, then the structure can provide a legitimate excuse for resituating the discussion.