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TIMES INSIDER

What Broadway Gets Right and Wrong About Journalism

A Culture writer takes stock of recent stage productions that depict newsrooms and reporters.

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By Sarah Bahr
Sarah Bahr has never seen an editor conga line in a newsroom, but she enjoyed the one in the 2019 Broadway production of “Ink.”

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One can hardly blame people for believing journalists have questionable ethics.

The portrayal that is ubiquitous across pop culture isn’t flattering: A striving workaholic who sleeps with a source (“Richard Jewell”). A narcissist willing to put people’s lives on the line to get a story (“Die Hard”). A nosy witch who relies on gossip instead of fact (Rita Skeeter in “Harry Potter”).

Four stage productions I saw this year in New York City have piled on to this less-than-flattering depiction of my profession.

The reporters onstage were in desperate need of a course in journalistic ethics. They were manipulative (“Yellow Face”). They had an agenda (“McNeal”). They didn’t identify themselves as journalists (“Safety Not Guaranteed,” a musical based on the film of the same name), and they misrepresented their reporting experience (“Breaking the Story”).

Any one of these characters would be fired, or, at least, one would hope, disciplined for their behavior. For me, watching fictional journalists scheme their way to scoops is akin to what I imagine it must feel like for doctors to watch “Grey’s Anatomy.”

In addition to my role as an editor on The New York Times's Flexible Editing desk, I also write for the Culture section. (I see more than 250 films, plays and musicals each year.) And I cover journalism itself: I've written more than 100 Times Insider articles that explain how reporters do their jobs.

So, let me share how some stage scenarios would most likely unfold in a real newsroom.

The reporter characters who approach their interview subjects with clear agendas in "McNeal" and "Yellow Face" — the former a New York Times Magazine writer aiming to deliver a hit piece on a star writer, the latter a Times reporter angling to weasel his way into a steaming-hot scoop — would find themselves censured by their newsrooms, should their tactics come to light.

The Times does not, and would not, knowingly publish an article obtained by the unscrupulous undercover methods employed by the journalists in "Safety Not Guaranteed," who never disclose to the subject of their piece who they are, or that they are reporting a story.

Then there's a former war correspondent in the darkly comic drama "Breaking the Story," who misrepresents herself by saying she was inside a hotel that was bombed when she was only near it. Though she is haunted by her deception, she nevertheless accepts an award, perversely rationalizing that her injuries brought attention to the suffering of the people she was covering.

But in real life, there are consequences for bending the truth. Brian Williams, the former NBC Nightly News anchor, was suspended for six months and then demoted amid the revelation that he had not been inside a helicopter shot down by enemy fire while covering the Iraq War in 2003, as he had repeatedly claimed, but was instead in a second helicopter.

These are cardinal journalistic sins, but the stage is also full of less egregious inaccuracies.

For one, there's the story-writing glory montage.

You know the one: A journalist — after months of labor-intensive reporting — sits down to write a beautiful 3,000-word cover story in about 60 seconds, often to a superhero-esque score. The backspace key isn't used once as facts and quotes magically pour out into one seamless, orderly, beautiful narrative.

If only.

Here's a secret: Writing is still hard when you're a journalist — maybe even more so, with the added pressure that your article may be read by millions of readers. But a writer holed up in a room for hours on end, furiously chewing through pack after pack of gum while churning out page after page — pausing to rearrange sections, fussing over adjectives — does not compelling stagecraft make.

Of course, plays are not meant to explain the journalistic process — they are for entertainment. And playwrights do get some things right: The long hours. (Is it even a journalism story if the protagonist doesn't cancel plans or miss a family dinner?) The punishing deadlines. The sources who call, text and email at all hours, meaning you're never really off the clock. The competition to get a scoop.

And there are some thrilling parts of journalism that theatermakers do justice to: The rush of chasing a story ("Almost Famous"). The exhilaration of nailing down a key fact or document after hours of searching ("Corruption"). The satisfaction of seeing the result of weeks of assiduous reporting in print ("The Connector").

That's the real, high-stakes drama. We certainly can't put words in people's mouths, but we can definitely publish the ones they do say.

And that can make all the difference.

Without the dogged work of ethical journalists, the Watergate scandal may have never been exposed.

Sexual abuse in the Catholic church may have never been brought to light.

And the disgraced film producer Harvey Weinstein, who was at the center of sexual assault allegations that set off the global #MeToo movement, may never have been arrested.

The stories that play out onstage are entertaining, it's true. But I find the real ones to be greater than fiction.

Sarah Bahr writes about culture and style for The Times. More about Sarah Bahr

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