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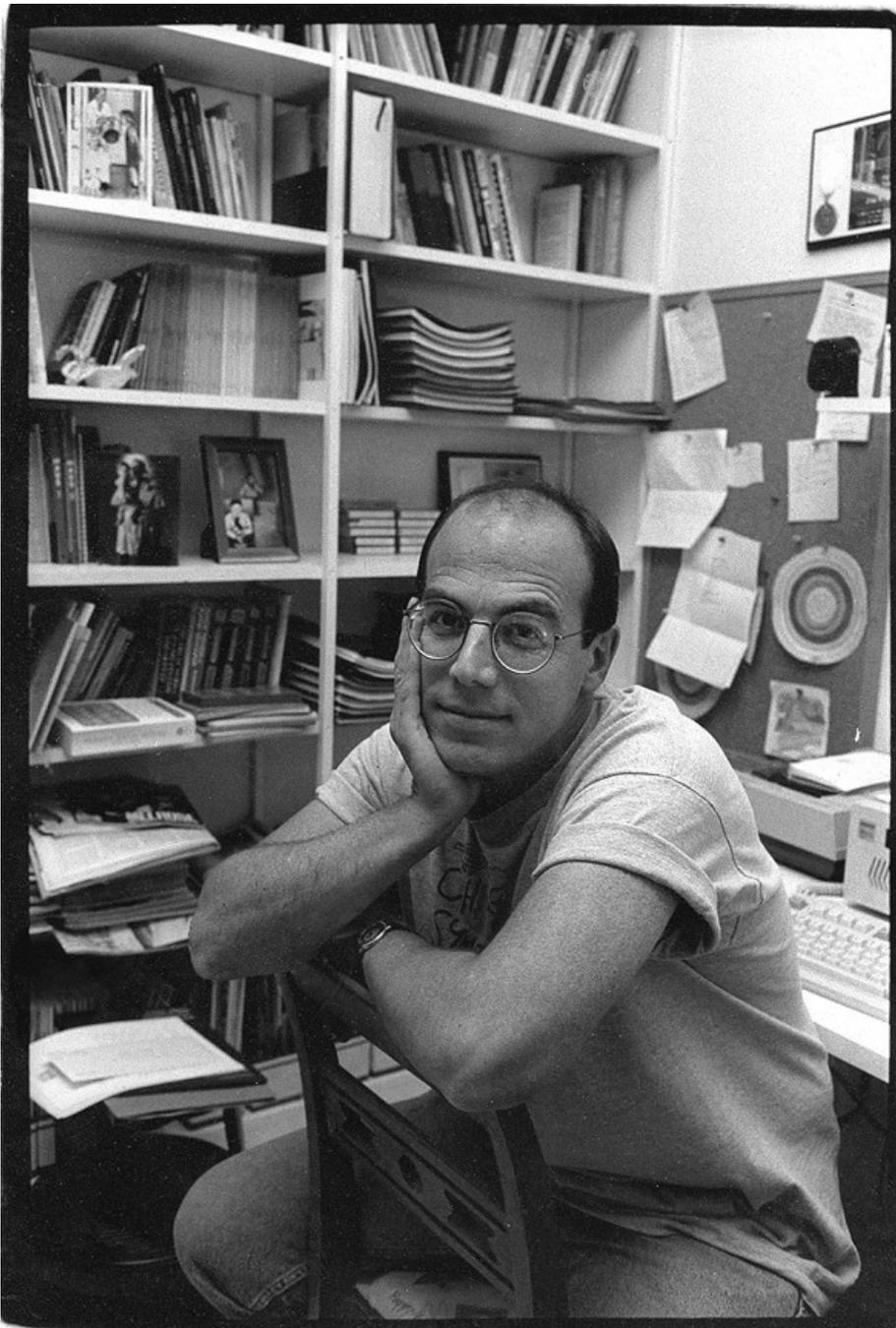
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## Goodbye to Tony Adler, the best weekly theater critic Chicago's ever had

Posted By Max Maller on 11.26.18 at 06:00 AM

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Tony Adler in his office at the old *Reader* building at 11 E. Illinois.

KATHY RICHLAND

Tony Adler stepped down as the *Reader's* senior theater critic last month. He was an institution, having spent the better part of his career here, and his exit leaves behind a gap that the cultural community at large will have a hard time restoring. He joins Peter Margasak and J.R. Jones on the list of longtime arts writers at the paper to have left recently.

In 2006, Adler became the *Reader's* arts editor. He wore a lot of hats over the years—not just the dapper fedoras, straw hats, and homburgs he was always seen with at openings, but also as assignments editor and an occasional correspondent on poetry and gallery openings. His writing was a model for everybody who worked under him at the paper; to all serious or casual playgoers in town, who either happened to flip to his page or read him each

week with dedication, his reviews' hardscrabble eloquence consistently put this mysterious, sweaty, unique thing called Chicago theater in perspective. He had standards, not favorites, and it was impossible to bait him. Week in and week out, he was always willing to be surprised.

"He was reviewing plays, but at the same time he was writing about a much bigger picture—human nature, right and wrong, morality and justice," recalls Michael Lenehan, formerly the *Reader's* chief editorial executive. When Adler started out at the paper under Lenehan in 1980, not just the *Reader's* arts coverage but Chicago theater in general were still coming into their own. Then a freelancer fresh from Carnegie Mellon University with a degree in English, Adler was happy to jump into the scrum like any other theater critic in those days (or these), and could "lambaste a phony actor or a pompous director as well as anyone," says Lenehan. But he didn't revel in abuse. He would describe the performance at hand with alacrity and attention, weaving its merits and flaws into the broader texture of what theater in this city was or could be. "I started thinking of him as the conscience of Chicago's theater scene, and he filled that role for decades," Lenehan said.

Theater writing occupies a historically weird niche of journalism, in that the show under review usually never stays longer than a few weeks. There are critics who make it their duty to put as firm a shoulder to time's wheel as possible, as if good press could immortalize this play and an impassioned screed condemn that one. The truth is that an insanely small amount of works of theater have any staying power, and that we as critics don't get to decide what lasts.

In defiance of time's passing, the humble reviewer will do things like write a 7,000-word feature on Beau O'Reilly and Jenny Magnus, which Adler did in a 1994 issue of the *Reader*. O'Reilly, the perennially embattled north-side fringe scene's elfin panjandrum and founder of Curious Theatre Branch, sat down with Adler over iced tea in Bucktown. Things were gloomy. There were troupes folding and theaters shuttering all over the place. "As of this spring day in 1993," Adler observed with cold eyes, "Beau O'Reilly is the author of a pile of cunning, subversive performance works that will never be done a second time; the writer of many gorgeous songs that most people will never hear." Adler had to have had in mind, writing that, what reviewing theater every week can be like. But he also had to have understood that the critic who goes to Bucktown to have iced tea with Beau O'Reilly (who still runs Curious Theatre Branch out of the Prop Thtr in Avondale and currently teaches at SAIC) or commits the extraordinary life story of Jenny Magnus to print, is first and foremost a chronicler.

Ask even the crustiest veteran on the scene and they won't be able to tell you who Lefty Fizzle was. But they should, for if in Chicago there is a god in charge of the theater, it's Lefty Fizzle. Here is Adler's description of O'Reilly's wildest creation.

If you've never seen Lefty Fizzle you've missed something extraordinary. I first laid eyes on him December 12, 1986, at a Maestro Subgum show in a Wicker Park bar called DaVinci's. He entered, as I remember, from a swing above our heads and didn't quit until he'd stripped down to his defiantly untanned, untanned flesh. At the time he had long hair that he divided into three sections, braiding each section with fabric—and probably wire—so that he appeared to have two horns on top of his head and another at the back. Now Beau O'Reilly is not what you'd call a conventionally handsome man. In fact, if it weren't for the liquid tenderness of his blue gray eyes, he'd come near to being scary: a Buddha-bellied, thick-featured, stubble-faced creature out of Tolkien, whose steel brush eyebrows seem always on the verge of meeting and marching down toward the goatee that expands and contracts from week to week across his chin. It's this coarseness, this tumid, teeming, unbridled quality—so unlike the melancholy solicitude of his offstage manner—that comes through in the Lefty persona. With his wide-eyed Fizzle leer and his hair horns, he struck me from the start as a kind of Pan.

Go see a play at any of the untold hundreds of attic spaces, black boxes, garages, and storefronts where fine small theater is sold here in town, and you will feel Lefty Fizzle leering at you over your shoulder.

Adler in his short reviews was more interested in celebrating the particular glories a play achieved than he was in being nasty. He resisted whatever urge he might have felt on occasion to take potshots, even when the show was crap. The wry tinge he allowed himself in these cases came out stronger in person, anyhow. Tal Rosenberg, the former *Reader* online editor and then culture editor, told me about a *Reader* staff meeting when the stream of news pitches for an upcoming issue was running thin. After a few lukewarm suggestions, Adler raised his hand. "Well," he said, "*Hannukats: The Musical* is opening!"

Arts writing has never gotten the respect it deserves in Chicago, Rosenberg says, but for half a lifetime, Adler enlivened the cultural community with his commitment and wit. Rosenberg, now senior culture editor of *Chicago* magazine, counts Adler—along with Jones and *Reader* music editor Philip Montoro—as an invaluable mentor.

A lifelong Evanstonian, Adler was as deeply invested in chronicling local theater as he was in enriching it. He contributed two

indispensable articles to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago* on theater and improvisational theater, tracing the almost forgotten lineage from the early 20th century "little theater" movement to the present-day storefront scene. Another lesser-known side of Adler's contribution is his role in cofounding the Actors Gymnasium, one of the leading circus and movement training facilities in the country. Chicago had long been a "kitchen sink drama" sort of town, as Adler once put it. You didn't need a harness or a movement coach to do David Mamet and Terrence McNally.

But not everyone agreed. "The colors, the music, the grace, the levitation, the quick interplay of live beings suspended like fitful lightning in a cloud, those things are the play, not words," Tennessee Williams once said. After learning that ensemble members at Lookingglass Theatre were intent on adding a new physical dimension to performances, Adler got in touch with Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi and others to help move rehearsals from a little old loft space on 16th Street to the Cultural Art Center in Evanston. The venture was more of a gamble in 1993 than it might seem today, but it worked. Soon, the big houses were all sending their casts to Evanston for training, and the Actors Gymnasium helped propel Lookingglass Theatre to a Regional Theatre Tony Award in 2011.

"Tony was instrumental in changing the physicality of Chicago theater," says Hernandez-DiStasi. "All that wouldn't have happened if he hadn't made that phone call."

With this summary of his achievements concluded and now that we all agree that Tony Adler was the best weekly critic of Chicago theater in the city's history, I would like to acknowledge that he was also the one who brought me on at the *Reader* as a critic, and that I'll be always be grateful to him. He may think this whole piece was mushy of me; he may gently remind me in a few days that he's retired, not dead. But this is the end of an era, and a fine occasion to look back over his great career. I will miss reading him every week.

Tags: Tony Adler, theater criticism, Michael Lenehan, Beau O'Reilly, Jenny Magnus, Lefty Fizzle, Tal Rosenberg, Actors Gymnasium, Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, Encyclopedia of Chicago, Chicago theater history, Curious Theatre Branch, Lookingglass Theatre, Prop Thtr, fringe theater, off-Loop theater, Image

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