

DeCON STRUCTING CRITICISM

Filtering feedback to
achieve your truest
work



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

- 1. MEET ALEX**
- 2. THE BREAK-UP**
- 3. THE BREAK-DOWN**
- 4. YOUR INNER CRITIC**
- 5. MENTAL PILATES**
- 6. ONLYNESS**
- 7. AN ALEX PREPARES**
- 8. FIND YOUR FILTER PT 1**
- 9. FIND YOUR FILTER PT 2**
- 10. POST-CRIT**
- 11. INSPIRATION VS EDIT**
- 12. THE MAN IN THE ARENA**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2021, when we were all still shaking off the remnants of our Covid trauma, I was approached by the creator of Maestra and offered the opportunity to teach a workshop of my choosing. *Is there anything you feel strongly about that could be of help to our members?* Maestra is an organization which supports women and nonbinary people in the musical theater industry and their members are, in fact, a force of immensely talented writers and musicians working on Broadway and across the globe. Frankly, I was in need of their advice. What could I possibly help *them* with? Then I remembered something.

Pre-pandemic I had been accepted into the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop, a two-year program that is widely regarded as the premiere training ground for emerging musical theatre composers, lyricists, and librettists. The workshop has produced a long list of EGOT, Peabody and Pulitzer award winners so it is not an exaggeration to say that every person in that room believes they are the next Lin Manuel Miranda — and could very well be. It's the kind of place that would make a really good reality show. All the ingredients are there: talent, ego, stakes, drama, conflict and a ticking clock.

We met weekly in a glass encased boardroom with stunning views of lower Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty beckoning in the distance. My fellow writers hailed from the city's boroughs, America's cities, Europe and Australia. They

brought with them years of training and impressive résumés. All of us understood how important it was to have made it to that room. I, Jamaica-born and America-raised, was fresh off a successful run of my first musical, FORA, at the much beloved but now defunct New York Musical Theater Festival. After a much needed sabbatical I had moved back to the city in order to join the Workshop. Flat broke and sleeping on a friend's couch, I was determined to make this gambit work. On that first day I smiled ear to ear brimming with confidence, having no clue that a self-doubt tsunami was heading my way.

The way BMI works is that a lyricist and composer are randomly paired and given a topic on which to write a song. The duo then collaborates on music and lyrics, recruits singers, presents the song then receives feedback from classmates and the BMI moderators. The first song I presented was met with silence by my fellow writers then ripped to shreds by the moderator. I've never felt so small. Standing in the cold of that moment I prayed for the proverbial giant hole to open up and swallow me. It did not. I was forced to marinate in the salt of my wounded ego and broken expectations then stumbled home in a daze.

For my second song presentation, the critique was less harsh and the experience slightly less horrendous — but only *slightly* as at the last minute our singer cancelled and I had to face my phobia of public singing. As I sighed helplessly and reached for that first note I felt sure that BMI was trying to kill me. But I sang and I lived. I wanted to quit but I didn't.

I hit the third song out of the park.

In the second year of the program a fellow lyricist approached me after a presentation and expressed, rather wistfully, how much she admired the way I took criticism. What did she see? To my mind I hadn't done anything remarkable that day but she'd seen something different. Although we'd started the program at the same time, somewhere along the way I had *found my filter*.

That is what I remembered.

That is what I taught in that first Maestra workshop and that is what we'll be exploring in this book.

As a writer I've had marvelous feedback that unlocks something in my brain. I feel understood, elevated by the discourse and cannot wait to get back to the page and write again.

I've also had confusing feedback where I get caught in the space between my intent and it's perception. The essence of my creation gets lost and I have to muddle my way back to the center of the piece.

I have also had horrendous feedback. Cutting, unhelpful, and personal in a way that causes me to question both the validity of the assessment and the motive of the assessor.

What these experiences taught me is that giving criticism is a skill, but it is a learned skill - which means that not everyone has it. As a creator it is up to you to learn how to

parse the various opinions that get thrown at your work because no one understands your vision better than you do. When we deconstruct criticism it means we are, first, dismantling the definition of what criticism is, then utilizing specific tools to filter it. This process creates a kind of code, breaking down critique into ones and zeroes, smaller, more actionable ideas that are easier to assess. I truly wish I'd had these tools on that first day of BMI.

This book is not an end-all-be-all on how to dodge the stings and arrows that can accompany criticism because every experience, however unpleasant, has value.

It is not about audience criticism.

It is not about media criticism.

It is not, primarily, about your your Inner Critic, although that component is touched upon in these pages.

DeConstructing Criticism is an exercise in listening. A conversation. A primer for decoupling your feedback from your sense of self-worth and silencing your Inner Critic long enough for you to get some work done.

As people who make things, understanding how to refine this skill is critical.

By the way, I've recounted the story of my traumatic first BMI presentation to various people who were in the room that day.

No one remembers it.