

# Liz Lerman's CRITICAL RESPONSE PROCESS

## The Core Steps and an Interview with Liz Lerman

In the early 1990s, frustrated by her experiences at both the giving and the receiving ends of criticism, choreographer Liz Lerman evolved a new approach to group critique on artistic works in progress. Critical Response Process is a facilitated, four-step method that emphasizes the values of dialogue and inquiry and the opportunity for artists to exercise a degree of control in the criticism directed at their work. Developed at Liz Lerman's home institution, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, and through workshops at the Colorado Dance Festival and Alternate ROOTS, the Critical Response Process was soon embraced by artists and institutions throughout the U.S. and abroad, including dance departments, theater companies, and community arts collectives.

In 2003, after refining the process through myriad conversations and workshops, Liz Lerman collaborated with her colleague John Borstel to write a 62-page guide titled *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process*<sup>SM</sup>: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert. The book is excerpted here to offer a brief outline of the process.

Last summer, Nancy Stark Smith met up with Liz at the Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, Maine, and interviewed her to get her latest thinking about this constantly evolving method.  
—JB & Eds.



photo © SheShooters

Liz Lerman with cast members in *Hallelujah*, performed at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, 2001.

by Liz Lerman and John Borstel

**T**he **Critical Response Process** follows four core steps and includes three roles—artist, responders, and a facilitator.

### THE ROLES:

- The artist offers a work-in-progress for review and is prepared to question that work in a dialogue with other people.
- **Responders** (one, a few, or many), committed to supporting the artist's intent to make excellent work, engage in dialogue with the artist.
- The **facilitator** initiates each step, keeps the process on track, and works to help the artist and responders use the process to frame useful questions and responses.

### THE CORE STEPS

#### Step One: Statements of Meaning

No matter how short the presentation, how fragmentary the excerpt, or how early the stage of development, artists want to hear that what they have just completed has significance to another human being. So the facilitator starts step one by asking the responders: "What has meaning for you about what you have just seen?" or "What was stimulating, surprising, evocative, memorable, touching, unique, compelling, meaningful for you?" The point is to offer responders a palette of

choices through which to define and express their reactions. Though we discourage facilitators from explicitly asking for "affirmations," step one should be framed in a positive light.

## Step Two: Artist as Questioner

In this step, the creator asks the questions. The more that artists can clarify their focus, the more intense and deep the dialogue becomes. General questions often elicit more varied responses. Specific questions, naturally, bring forth a more focused and precise commentary. Both can be helpful. Artists can always broaden or narrow their exploration with a follow-up question if the original query doesn't yield the information they seek. Here the facilitator may need to probe with more questions—not answers—to help the artist find the heart of the matter. [See *Sample Dialogue*]

## Step Three: Neutral Questions from Responders

The dialogue is now reversed, and responders can ask the artist informational or factual questions. Further, if they have opinions, responders can take this opportunity—in advance of stating the opinion in step four—to form the opinion into a neutral question.

For many people, forming a neutral question is not only difficult but a seemingly ridiculous task if criticism is the point. But the practice of trying to form opinions into neutral questions enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play. Often these are the very questions that the artist needs to hear.

The neutral question is a common stumbling block for people. Therefore it can help, when first introducing the Process, for the facilitator to lead the group in practicing how to form neutral questions in response to a hypothetical work of art (not the piece under review). The Critical Response Process emphasizes the benefits of getting artists to think about their work in a fresh way, as opposed to telling them how to improve their work or asking them to defend it. This aim is supported by the discipline of the neutral question.

### RESPONDER QUESTIONS:

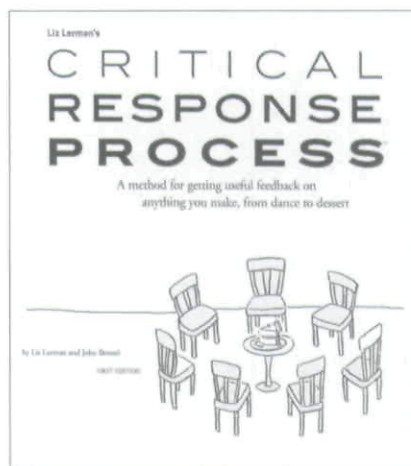
#### OPINIONATED...



#### ...AND NEUTRAL



illustration by John Borstel



The Core Steps and Sample Dialogue texts in this article are excerpted from the book, *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup>: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*, by Liz Lerman and John Borstel; 2003, Dance Exchange, Inc., Takoma Park, MD. Available at [www.danceexchange.org](http://www.danceexchange.org).

From *Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process<sup>SM</sup>: A method for getting useful feedback on anything you make, from dance to dessert*.





Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in Liz Lerman's *Small Dances About Big Ideas*.

## Opinions like objects

*I sometimes demonstrate one of the functions of the "I have an opinion..." permission requests in step four by doing this: While I'm in the middle of my explanation of the step, I'll wad up a piece of paper and toss it at an unsuspecting group member, who usually flinches and fumbles in response. Then I'll pick up the paper, make eye contact with the same person and say "Catch!" then toss again, to a now-deft receiver. Opinions can feel very much like objects thrown at us. If we have no preparation, we can often feel affronted rather than engaged. But with a little notice and a moment to adjust to what's coming at us, we can be in a much better position to "catch" the opinion.*

—John Borstel

## Step Four: Permissioned Opinions

Now the facilitator invites opinions, with a particular protocol: Responders first name the topic of the opinion and ask the artist for permission to state it. For instance, "I have an opinion about the costumes. Do you want to hear it?"

The artist has the option to say "yes" or "no." The artist may have several reasons for not wanting to hear the opinion: Perhaps he has already heard enough opinions about the costumes and wants to move to something else; perhaps he is very interested in hearing about the costumes but not from that responder; or perhaps the opinion is irrelevant—for example, the costumes used for the showing have nothing to do with those planned for the ultimate performance. In every case, artists have the option to say "no," or "not right now." In most cases, however, the artist will say "yes," because the Process has laid the groundwork for this moment.

Throughout step four, the repeated expressions of "I have an opinion about... would you like to hear it" can strike some participants as stilted and unnatural. The step may seem formal, but often the formality, discipline, and structure inherent in the Process make it safe for people to go into a more challenging dialogue.

## SAMPLE DIALOGUE

*What follows is one of several fictitious dialogues that appear in the book demonstrating the kinds of conversations that occur when the guidelines of the Critical Response Process are observed. In the book, annotations in the margins note the dynamic of the dialogue and indicate the facilitator's perceptions and choices in directing the Process.*

### SAMPLE DIALOGUE 1: Getting to the Heart of the Artist's Question

*Scenario: The artist, a playwright, has presented a scene representing a father confronting an alcoholic teenage son. We have arrived at step two in the Process, and the artist is posing her first question.*

**Artist:** How familiar or unfamiliar did the story seem?

**Responder 1:** I could relate to it out of my own experience since something like this happened in my family; the attitudes of the father character seemed very real to me.

**Responder 2:** It's not like anything I've experienced, since it's about alcoholism

and I really don't have any firsthand experience of that.

*Responses continue in a similar vein.*

Facilitator: Is this helpful?

Artist: Well, it's interesting to hear.

Facilitator: Is it getting at the issue you are trying to pursue in your question?

Artist: Not really.

Facilitator: Maybe it would help to make the question more specific. Can you state why the categories of "familiar or unfamiliar" are important to you?

Artist: Well, I'm aware that the topic—alcoholism, teen alcoholism specifically—is one that gets touched on sometimes in the mass media, so I guess my hope is that this scene might convey something that an audience hasn't seen before on TV or in the movies.

Facilitator: Okay, do you think you could phrase a question that gets at that?

Artist: Let's see... Compared to other treatments you may have seen of teen alcoholism, did this scene seem like a fresh take on the topic?

Facilitator: Good...and maybe you can add something more specific to that so you get more than "yes" or "no."

Artist: Okay... So if your answer is yes, what in particular seemed fresh, and if it's no, where did it seem familiar?

Facilitator: Great, so now put that all together into one question.

You can turn any step  
four, any opinion,  
into a neutral  
question that you  
might have asked in  
step three. So out in  
the world, I practice  
it sometimes—  
what is the neutral  
question that could  
be pulled out of that  
very strong opinion?

—Liz Lerman



photo © John Kubat

Liz Lerman Dance Exchange rehearses *Man/Chair Dances* with the Omaha Symphony Orchestra in Omaha, Nebraska, at the Holland Performing Arts Center, February 2006.

What I experience  
is that people get  
up from Critical  
Response and they  
cannot wait to go  
back into the studio.  
That is my definition  
of good feedback.

—Liz Lerman

Artist: Okay... *[takes deep breath]* Compared to other treatments of teen alcoholism you may have seen, did this scene offer you a fresh take, or did it seem overly familiar? And tell where or what seemed particularly fresh or too familiar.

Facilitator: Great. Do you think that gets at your concern?

Artist: Yes.

Facilitator: Does anyone have a response?

Responder 1: Yes, it seemed fresh to me, and it goes back to what I mentioned before, the character of the father; it seems like you've conveyed his struggle in a compassionate and complex way. It's clear that while he's taking responsibility, he's not positioned as the perpetrator of the son's alcoholism. And you haven't portrayed him as simply the victim of it either.

Responder 2: Well now that I understand what you're getting at, I'd actually say yes, it does seem familiar, at least in terms of the emotions: guilt, anger, reproaches, outbursts. That and the business about discovering the hidden liquor bottles; it does seem typical of how we tend to think about this problem. But there were other details—the story about the camping trip, the way the father talks about his divorced wife in that jokey way—those things made it seem to go to a deeper level than something on TV.

Facilitator: *[to artist]* Is this helpful?

Artist: Definitely!

♦



photo © Michael Mazzola

Margot Greenlee in Liz Lerman's *Ferocious Beauty: Genome* at the work's premiere at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, February 2006.

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