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ABSTRACT

The author states that little research has been done to date in the area of audience reaction to Readers Theater stimuli, but some guidelines can be cited for directors and authors in their efforts to involve audiences in Readers Theater productions. Authors of Readers Theater materials are advised to use aesthetic factors inherent in the literature itself, supplemented by presentational rather than representational production factors, to guide audiences into their role as mental participants in the stage events. Further, technical effects should be limited to those possible in small conventional theaters such as are in most communities. Directors of Readers Theater productions should be aware that a presentation time of one hour or less seems most effective and that the more theatrical effects of sound and dramatic lighting, movement, and dress can be used to enhance audience appeal. The focus of presentations should always be toward the audience and to its horizontal center. Research into increasing the audience appeal of Readers Theater should be carried beyond present levels. (CH)

AUDIENCE-ROLE CONSIDERATIONS IN WRITING FOR READERS THEATRE

Mary Fowler Beasley

This study, presented as a paper at the 1973 Southern Speech Communication Association Convention in Lexington, Kentucky, attempts to define a special role for the audience in Readers Theatre. It suggests guidelines for the writer or adapter of Readers Theatre presentations to use in assisting audience members to prepare for and participate in the experience of Readers Theatre. Guidelines are based on theory and meager research into the area of audience reaction to Readers Theatre stimuli. The author recommends further research into the area of audience reaction to Readers Theatre practices.

The science-fiction novel Brave New World by Aldous Huxley describes a new form of entertainment enjoyed in the year 632 A.F. (After Ford). The "Feelies," an experience which is similar to our "movies" except that the audience members also physically feel what they see on the screen--rushing wind in a storm, an embrace, gritty sand on a beach--have as their purpose to distract the audience from contemporary problems in much the same way that the "bread and circuses" idea functioned in ancient Rome. Today we are seeing the increasing exploitation of a recently rediscovered medium of purposeful entertainment which is known under

several titles but is most commonly called Readers Theatre. The striking success of such Broadway productions as Don Juan in Hell, John Brown's Body, The World of Carl Sandburg, Brecht on Brecht, and Dear Liar have drawn attention to an increase in audience interest in the medium.[1] The Readers Theatre Handbook cites the annual listing of productions prepared by the Bibliography Committee of the Interpretation Interest Group of the Speech Communication Association of America, and the reports of performances detailed in the Educational Theatre Journal as evidence of the increasing work done in the medium in colleges and secondary schools.[2] Monroe testifies to the marked increase in college and community interest in such performances in the past decade, among both the readers and the public.[3]

We would hope that the function of Readers Theatre is not similar to the negative-distraction function of Huxley's "Feelies." Some observers are at present groping toward an explanation of the value of the medium--why it has been attracting audiences in significantly increasing numbers--in terms of a felt need in our society. Veilleux discusses the phenomenon of imaging, which is "roughly approximate to the sense of the colloquial expression 'seeing in the mind's eye,'" and suggests that the experience may be of psychological value to the audience. He cites other authors who make reference to imaging, basing their concept on ancient poetic theory.[4] Imaging can occur, and perhaps is occurring, among members of a Readers Theatre audience. McLuhan and

Fiore theorize that modern advances in mass media are recreating in us the "multidimensional space orientation of the 'primitive.'"[5] They report that the ear, rather than the eye, is once more the primary receptor of the message, due to new developments in media.[6] According to Boring, the aural faculty varies from the visual in that it involves us more--and audience involvement is what we want in Readers Theatre. Boring states that the aural faculty is, as McLuhan and Fiore have found, less spatially restrictive than the visual; it reacts upon our entire nervous system to a greater degree; and it heightens our awareness of tactile and kinetic values.[7] Perhaps these investigations indicate part of the reason for audience interest. Lack of a definite explanation of the function of Readers Theatre in regard to its audience, however, does not prevent experimentation in the medium, nor should it, so long as we are "successful" in satisfying the need.

By far, most of the experimentation which has been done in Readers Theatre has been with the adaptation of existing stories, poems, plays, or other literary forms[8] which were originally written with another medium in mind. Although Maclay devotes a chapter in her recent text to script selection and adaptation, there is no mention of special Readers Theatre guidelines in writing an original script.[9] General considerations, not "rules," have been suggested by Coger and White in their Handbook, for use by the adapter of such material.[10] Although they mention very recent interest in

the creation of original material for Readers Theatre,[11] again no suggestions are offered for the writing of the original script. Presumably, many of the same general considerations would apply to original writing as to adapting, but, in my opinion, much greater opportunity is offered for the original writer to "write in" or omit according to his preview of the possibilities and imitations of the medium. Especially in such a "new" field of writing, where even old rules for breaking do not exist to the extent that they do in conventional theatre, for example, the individual writer for Readers Theatre must necessarily be his own arbiter, at least until and unless his audience indicates to him that he is not satisfying the need which a public performance should fulfill.

Obviously, medium is important to any writer. Gallaway has found in conventional theatre that significant changes in the scripts of first plays by writers oriented toward media other than theatre, such as journalism, television script writing, and the novel, have been made as these writers realized the different demands of the new medium.[12] It is reasonable to assume that a similar pattern of vision and revision would take place in the thinking of the writer writing for the first time in Readers Theatre. Heretofore, writers of prose fiction have generally visualized a solitary audience--one person--reading their words silently from a printed page; or, in the case of the dramatist, a "conventional" theatre audience, ready to be entertained, and not with sound uppermost. Audience members may expect visual spectacle to be at least

as important as sound, if not more so. These authors thus provide opportunities for audience participation consistent with their views of their media.

The chief obstacle, perhaps, to the writer's full utilization of the Readers Theatre medium to induce a different form, or a greater degree, of audience participation, is one of audience experience itself--past patterns of reaction. The audience's job in Readers Theatre is to act in the recreative experience rather than simply to witness it. The audience members must visualize and participate mentally, not sit and wait to be acted upon. Yet people tend to identify new experiences with old ones, and while this characteristic can be of assistance in allowing them to image, it may prevent their realizing that in this new experience they have a new role. We tend to pick from our memories whatever past experience is most similar to the new experience and use the guidelines formed in the old experience to apply to the new situation. It is probable that audiences will find their past experiences with conventional theatre most similar to Readers Theatre. They will tend to react to the new form as they have to the old, and simply wait to be entertained. Expecting the representational lighting, costumes, scenery, "acting," and other factors which create the illusion of reality on stage, they may, at worst, react by leaving their minds as blank as the usually-bare stage of Readers Theatre.

How can the writer, in preparing his script, help the audience members to conceive and carry out their roles? The

introductory "close-your-eyes-and-let's-imagine" approach of the kindergarten or elementary teacher is perhaps a good one for the less sophisticated, but it generally does not appeal to an adult Readers Theatre audience.[13] Coger and White have written a sort of "dramatic explanation" which might be read by the readers as a didactic introduction of the purposes and techniques of Readers Theatre to the audience.[14] Program notes, skillfully phrased so as not to seem overly didactic, may conceivably be used to assist in explaining the new reaction expected of the audience. A view I hold strongly, however, is that the author of original material can use aesthetic factors inherent in the literature itself, supplemented by presentational, not representational, production factors, to guide the audience members into their roles as mental participants in the action.

Although the writer in the Readers Theatre medium should not sacrifice needed literary qualities to "audience-pandering," he should consider certain audience attention factors (which are not necessarily limitations) as he writes. Simple language and sentence construction should be used; imaging can seemingly be more easily done if unnecessary complexities of language are avoided.[15] The audience members should use their mental-imaginational-emotional capacities as well as their mental-intellectual-comprehensional capacities. In addition, rhetorical questions and "pregnant pauses" used by the readers as natural parts of dialogue or monologue could help the audience participate.

My experience with the medium has indicated that a presentation time of approximately one hour or less seems more effective than a longer time. Further, so much more is demanded of the audience in terms of mental ability to image, that interludes for mental relaxation and regrouping of faculties through degrees of demand for imaging could be used. Passages with a high degree of "incompleteness," requiring more imaging fill-in by the audience, could alternate with passages with relatively more representational qualities and aids.

Naturally motivated attention-keepers in the script could also assist in shepherding audience imaging to keep attention centered on successive performance cues rather than images extended independently by audience members beyond the theme. Continued re-attracting of attention could be done through image-directing cues written into the script, much as stage directions are written into conventional theatre scripts. Suggestive cues for the audience may be provided by brief musical interludes, natural pauses, shifts in reader stance or position, and lighting changes. Such cues keep and guide attention by providing variety, familiarity (repeated theme music or lighting pattern), movement, color, and other attention factors. They must be naturally motivated, of course.

Place of performance also must influence the writer in Readers Theatre just as it influences writers in more familiar forms.[16] Some modern experimental theatres such as the ones at Memphis State University and Purdue University seem

especially adaptable to oral interpretation, since they combine excellent technical facilities with the small size and intimate audience-to-audience and audience-to-reader relationship possibilities needed in Readers Theatre. However, most communities don't have such facilities. The writer could make his presentation more accessible by limiting technical effects to those possible in a small conventional theatre such as most communities have, or even in an assembly room or "parlor" setting. It is probable that planning imagery to be dependent on elaborate light, color, and sound effects would require technical facilities possessed only by large theatres, and thus the needed intimacy or usability might be lost.

Use of sound holds great potential for directing the audience to act as imagists. Reflective passages should be especially important in Readers Theatre to suggest participation to the audience. Yet so often the effect of a beautiful reflective passage is lost because even talented college readers, and some professionals, cannot adequately "project" their voices in a small-to-medium conventional theatre while retaining the soft, dreamlike quality of the reflective mood. In a parlor setting, an experimental theatre, or a small assembly room, there would probably be no problem of reflective projection. In a large facility, methods which could be used to solve the problem might include the use of ceiling microphone pick-up or having reflective passages read by offstage voices using microphones. Onstage microphones, as experiments by Warland indicate, are distracting.[17] Warland

also reports that the use of non-visible voices is effective only when used sparingly; when used extensively, disembodied voices are annoying to the audience.[18] In a play in which reflective passages were extensive, I used a scrim wall to conceal the voices until they spoke, and then lit the area behind the scrim to allow the wall to disappear and make the readers of the "voices" (the embodied thoughts of characters, in this case) vaguely visible to the audience. Easily concealable neck microphones were used. While offstage voices are used, a "freeze" can be maintained by onstage readers.

Non-vocal, presentational sound can be used to help the audience image. For example, the "tick-tock" of a clock, repeated in selected passages, could be used to suggest the theme of time's swift passage. Organ music, associated with religious or ceremonial occasions by audience members, can turn their thoughts to appropriate imaging behavior. The sound of a siren in context could suggest mental, spiritual, or physical emergency. The innovative writer can write in cues for director and readers to assist in planning for imaging.

Several Readers Theatre productions have experimented with projected "scenery" and most seem to prove it valuable for audience imaging if used skillfully. Warland's findings bear out the preference for projected rather than conventional scenery, but warns that thematic function must be uppermost.[19] Parker and Smith state that projection, because it is extremely strong in dramatic power due to its use of light rather than

pigment, should be thought of as another actor in the play, used to reinforce theme.[20] Projection equipment is fairly portable and can be used in almost any location.

Lighting can be used to mark entrances and exits through the raising or lowering of spots. If special lighting effects are used, they should be presentational or expressionistic rather than representational.[21] Lighting color changes can indicate changes of mood, relationship, time, etc. A red spotlight on one reader (or stage area) with its intensity increasing, for example, could indicate progressing mental illness or evil. A deepening blue spot on a reader or general blue lighting that deepens as gloom progresses, or lowering of general lights, can indicate increased depression to the audience. Gradually raised lighting could indicate increasing hope, prosperity, or joy.

Movement should also be used to help the audience image. Warland's findings indicate that slight changes in the positions of the readers, suggestive of changing relationships, entrances, and exits, aids the audience in participating mentally. However, reports Warland, gross bodily movement--conventional "acting"--seems to greatly diminish the audience's will to image.[22] The audience reverts to being acted upon rather than being stimulated to participate. The nature of the characters and their relationship to each other should be considered by the director when he decides whether they should sit or stand on stage, steps, stool, or other object, and where they should be placed with relation to each other

and the presentation area.

The dress of readers should be expressionistically suggestive, not representationally conventional. Colors could suggest "color" of character, and long dress, short dress, robe, or sweater-and-pants could suggest theme of play and character.

The focus of the readers should be offstage throughout the presentation.[23] Warland provides empirical evidence to show that audience participation is heightened if focus is toward them--approximately the horizontal center of the audience--rather than above their heads. Warland finds this method of greater value than onstage focus or a combination of on- and off- stage focus.[24]

The use of other production factors cannot be exemplified for reasons of space, but generally speaking, the writer for Readers Theatre should keep in mind that he must "write in" opportunities for increased audience participation in Readers Theatre. Consideration of audience role and anticipation of audience imaging behavior should be a part of every line and presentation strategy the writer uses in writing specifically for the unique contribution of Readers Theatre to our culture. Unfortunately, research and even speculative theory concerning audience reaction to readers theatre presentation techniques is very meager, as is obvious from this paper itself. I strongly recommend experimental research into the area of audience reaction to readers theatre practices.

NOTES

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1. See the following article for a detailed account of these performances: Keith Brooks, Robert C. Henderhan, and Alan Billings, "A Philosophy on Readers Theatre," Speech Teacher, XII (September 1963), 229-230.

2. Leslie I. Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1967), p. 4.

3. Elizabeth A. Monroe, "The Group Reading of Drama: Its Essence and Artistic Principles" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963), pp. 122-129.

4. Jere Veilleux, "A Psychological Definition of Interpretation" (unpublished paper, Purdue University, 1967), p. 1.

5. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Message (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 57.

6. McLuhan and Fiore, p. 111.

7. Edwin G. Boring, The Physical Dimensions of Consciousness (New York: Dover, 1963), p. 37.

8. Leslie I. Coger, "Interpreters Theatre: Theatre of the Mind," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIX (April, 1963), 164.

9. Joanna Maclay, Readers Theatre: Toward A Grammar of Practice (New York: Random House, 1971).

10. Coger and White, pp. 21-37.

11. Coger and White, pp. 21-37.

12. Marian Gallaway, "An Exploratory Study of the Effect of the Medium on the Manuscript of Plays," Southern Speech Journal, XXIV (Winter, 1958), 75-83.

13. Frances Evans, "The Role of the Introduction in Oral Interpretation" (unpublished paper, Louisiana Polytechnic Institute, 1963), p. 27.

14. Coger and White, pp. iv-v.

15. Veilleux, p. 6.

16. Bernard Hewitt, J. F. Foster, and Muriel Wolle, Play Production: Theory and Practice (Chicago: Lippencott, 1959), p. 41.

17. Steven Warland, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Visual Delivery Upon Listener Response to the Oral Interpretation of Literature" (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1966), pp. 63-64. We may note here

that Cobin cites as a major research need the development of ways to assess the actual effectiveness of Readers Theatre techniques. His survey and that of Reynolds (1968) point to the paucity of empirical research in the field, a lack which this writer also regrets for the purposes of this paper. See Martin Cobin, "Oral Interpretation Research: Methods, Trends, Ideas," The Communicative Arts and Sciences of Speech, ed. Keith Brooks (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1967), pp. 332-347, and Jerry D. Reynolds, "Empirical Studies in Oral Interpretation: Audience," paper read before the Oral Interpretation Interest Group of the Central States Speech Conference, Chicago, April, 1968.

18. Warland, pp. 64-65.

19. Warland, pp. 19-20.

20. W. Oren Parker and Harvey K. Smith, Scene Design and Stagelighting (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 167.

21. Warland, pp. 21-23.

22. Warland, pp. 32-33.

23. See Coger and White for an explanation of focus.

24. Warland, pp. 23-25.