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ABSTRACT

Defining readers theatre as a technique for enhancing students' appreciation of literature and spoken language by dramatizing literary works in classroom settings, this booklet explains the basic principles of that form and offers exercises for applying those principles. The booklet notes that while the exercises are intended primarily for secondary school or college students, their underlying theoretical principles are valid for all instructional levels. The first section of the booklet provides a rationale for using readers theatre in the classroom and discusses its conventions, techniques for selecting appropriate literature to be dramatized, ways of staging the literature, and scripting of the literature. The second section provides 19 specific readers theatre exercises. (FL)

THEORY & RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE



# Beginning Readers Theatre: A Primer for Classroom Performance

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# Foreword

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a national information system developed by the U.S. Office of Education and now sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE). It provides ready access to descriptions of exemplary programs, reports on research and development efforts, and related information useful in developing effective educational programs.

Through its network of specialized centers or clearinghouses, each of which is responsible for a particular educational area, ERIC acquires, evaluates, abstracts, and indexes current information and lists that information in its reference publications.

The ERIC system has already made available through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service—a considerable body of data, including all federally funded research reports since 1956. However, if the findings of educational research are to be used by teachers, much of the data must be translated into an essentially different context. Rather than resting at the point of making research reports easily accessible, NIE has directed the separate ERIC clearinghouses to commission information analysis papers in specific areas from recognized authorities in those fields.

As with all federal educational information efforts, ERIC has as a primary goal bridging the gap between educational theory and classroom practice. One method of achieving that goal is the development by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (ERIC/RCS) of a series of booklets designed to meet concrete educational needs. Each booklet provides teachers with a review of the best educational theory and research on a limited topic followed by descriptions of classroom activities that will assist teachers in putting that theory into practice.

The idea is not unique. Several educational journals and many commercial textbooks offer similar aids. The ERIC/RCS booklets are, however, noteworthy in their sharp focus on educational needs and their pairing of sound academic theory with tested classroom practice. And they have been developed in response to the increasing number of requests from teachers to provide this kind of service.

Topics for these booklets are recommended by the ERIC/RCS National Advisory Board. Suggestions for topics are welcomed by the Board and should be directed to the Clearinghouse.

Bernard O'Donnell

Director, ERIC/RCS

# Preface

This booklet explains the basic principles of Readers Theatre—a technique for enhancing students' appreciation of literature and spoken language by dramatizing literary works in simple classroom settings. In addition, various exercises and other ways of applying the principles are described. The suggested exercises are for secondary school or college situations, but the underlying theoretical principles are valid for all instructional levels.

There is no single "right" approach to Readers Theatre. Each teacher is responsible for selecting materials and procedures that meet the needs and capabilities of his or her students. Teachers who have not used Readers Theatre as a classroom or cocurricular activity will discover, as many already have, that it is one of the best ways to enhance student appreciation of literature's power to dramatize action, reveal character, and explore the interplay of thoughts and feelings.

In fashioning the basic approach to the topic the author is indebted to Michael Z. Murphy, a sort of fellow travelling companion, for his selected vocal exercises; to Kevin Lee Allen, student and friend, for his illustrations; and to the "Wordmasters" of Montclair State College and my beloved students over the past ten years, for giving me the encouragement and confidence necessary to attempt new approaches to Readers Theatre. For them, especially the rebels, I pledge to continue the work and the worry.

Gerald Lee Ratliff

Montclair State College

# 1 Theoretical Prelude

The faint strains of a melodious lute float sweetly and quietly into a dimly lit classroom. There is a hush of excitement and anticipation as the music slowly fades. Four students enter silently from the corridors and approach the front of the classroom. One student, dressed in black and carrying a glistening sword, kneels in the center of the playing area and begins to weep. The other three move to stools arranged in a semicircle surrounding the area and sit.

Slowly, the student who is kneeling looks upward and then into the audience. Pain and suffering are etched on the sad face, and the sword trembles in his hand. The student speaks:

> O, that this too too solid flesh
> would melt,
> Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!

In this simple beginning, Readers Theatre has begun to dramatize literature in the secondary classroom, and to stimulate the imagination and the intellect of a host of young, eager, receptive adults. The classroom is alive with animation and enthusiasm. The literature is now relevant and meaningful. The lesson is learned and remembered. The instructor is pleased. All of this and more, because the classroom has become an exciting environment in which students may explore and experiment with new ways to perform and to stage literature. Readers Theatre is innovative and creative.

The primary theoretical principle of Readers Theatre in the secondary classroom is that it dramatizes literature in performance, thus providing both a visual and oral stimulus for the student who is unaccustomed to using imagination to appreciate literary works. This suggestive "theatrical mind" approach to the teaching and subsequent performance of literature is an exciting discipline, relying as it does on the creative viewpoint that to "see" literature is as relevant and valuable to a student's educational development as to read literature.

The primary performance principle of Readers Theatre in the secondary classroom is to give life and meaning to the experience described by the author, and to stimulate listeners to share in the intellectual participation and emotional involvement that make literature meaningful.

## Basic Approach

There are many ways to use Readers Theatre in the classroom. The

basic techniques that are chosen will depend on the instructor, the students, the type of literature being used, the facilities available, the time alloted, and the purpose of the performance. Readers Theatre may be used to enhance critical-study of literature and language, to explore appreciation and meaning of literature, to bring vitality and relevance to literature, to promote reading, writing, and listening skills, and as a means by which students may publicly display their creative talents as performers.

## Selected Conventions

Although Readers Theatre is a part of the traditional theatre movement which seeks to "stage" the actions, attitudes and emotions of literature as they are sketched by the author, selected conventions distinguish Readers Theatre from other theatrical productions and make it educationally valuable for classroom exploration.

In Readers Theatre, the performer's vocal responses and physical actions are directed forward, to assist the audience in visualizing what is being described in the literature. The setting, the mood, and the other characters detailed in the literature may also be projected into the audience to promote listener identification and association. In addition, a single performer in Readers Theatre may play a variety of roles in the literature and is more likely to develop creative performing skills because of the various interpretations needed to suggest more than one character.

Performers may either hold their scripts or place them on reading stands. They may stand in line facing the audience or sit on stools or chairs, or there may be combinations of sitting and standing. The instructor and the students are encouraged to choose the method that best expresses the author's intentions. Performers also usually remain on stage throughout the performance and may have individual lines of narration or they may share lines with other performers. They may wear suggestive costumes and make-up, or they may wear their own clothing.

Classroom staging in Readers Theatre may include the traditional elevated stage, framed by a proscenium arch, at one end of an auditorium, or it may be as flexible and creative as facilities permit. For example, the classroom may be arranged in the round, semicircle or three-quarters round. There is also the opportunity to make use of found space, open stages and environmental settings, which are discussed later in more detail. Staging may even include theatrical accessories like ramps, platforms, curtains, draperies, or a backdrop depicting a painted setting. Other features that may be used are lighting, sound, music, special effects, and projections to suggest the

locale of the literature.

Increasing familiarity with the possibilities of Readers Theatre will result in other ideas for enhancing the performances. Creative expression and originality on the part of instructor and students alike are the key ingredients for determining the procedures that will best express the meaning and feeling evoked by the literature, using whatever means are available.

## Performance Blueprint

With its own unique conventions, and those it shares with traditional theatre practice, Readers Theatre is such a creative, compatible performer-listener-oriented discipline that to arbitrarily limit it by definition would be to artistically limit its possibilities for experimentation. There is, however, a rather practical pattern of organization for framing the basic principles of Readers Theatre for classroom study and exploration. It is not intended as a model for imitation but, rather, as a kind of working performance blueprint for creative departure. The basic principles involved in the process include the (1) selection, (2) analysis, (3) scripting, (4) interpretation, (5) staging, and (6) performance of literature.

## Selection of Literature

The range of literature available to the instructor for Readers Theatre is limited only by the imagination necessary to dramatize novels, poems, short stories, letters, newspaper articles, diaries, or song lyrics. Indeed, the challenging aspect of the selection of literature is to go beyond the traditional playscript and to make any form of literature dramatic by giving it the characteristics associated with theatrical production and performance.

This variety of subject matter, while at first glance stimulating, presents some critical and artistic problems of judgment for the instructor. For example, is the choice of literature to be determined by its inherent dramatic appeal, its literary quality, or its provocative suggestion of character development? Or on the other hand, is the choice of literature to be determined merely by its familiarity or accessibility?

Although many instructors use Readers Theatre primarily to make what literature is being studied more meaningful and relevant, the selection of literature for performance should also be influenced by the degree of action and character development suggested by the author. Action, which includes physical activity, is necessary to encourage

the student to visualize images and to promote movement that builds a scripted program of literature to an unmistakable climax in performance. Character development—which includes a catalogue of thoughts, emotions, and responses that distinguish an individual's pattern of behavior—provides documentation for the performer's use of voice and body in dramatization.

Naturally the selection of literature should also consider the skill of the students who will be performing. The instructor may provide students with literature that encourages them (1) to role play, (2) to experience visual and aural involvement, (3) to fuller use of the voice and the body, (4) to become familiar with various genres and styles of literature, and (5) to experience a variety of moods and emotions. The creative instructor may also wish to incorporate student suggestions, including original compositions, popular song lyrics, and drawings, when scripting the program. This not only expands class participation but suggests the so-called ensemble approach that gives continuity and creativity to a Readers Theatre production.

**Analysis of Literature**

The basic analysis of the selected literature resembles the techniques employed in both the English classroom and play directing. The instructor and students should jointly strive to discover the complexities of the literature in terms of structure, language, and characterization; so that performance and staging possibilities may then be explored.

*First Reading: Appreciation*

At first it is well to read the literature appreciatively, with an ear for character interpretation and an eye for creative staging clues. The first reading should develop an indication of the author's intellectual and emotional thought, and should suggest whether the reader is sensitive to the description. The first reading should also reveal the primary action detailed in the literature, and whether the reader possesses the degree of association and familiarity necessary to dramatize the description. This reading may even evoke ideas for the staging that will give vitality to the author's intended meaning.

For example, an initial reading of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* may suggest that the best staging device to highlight the implication that marriage for Nora and Torvald Helmer has become a "childish plaything" is to place the performers in children's highchairs, facing the audience full-front, and that Nora's character may be interpreted by using a whining, pouting voice to convey the immaturity of her

early nature.

*Second Reading: Meaning*

A second reading of the literature should be more critical and objective than the first, and should concentrate on discovering the meaning of the literature. This analytical reading should consider the author's style in terms of (1) word choice, (2) sentence arrangement, (3) structure, (4) character description, and (5) theme. The second reading may also include a critical evaluation of the author's point of view, description of the setting, and mood or tone of the selection.

An evaluation of the basic structural and thematic principles discovered in the second reading invariably produces ideas for performance and staging approaches that will reveal the author's intent. It also provides the basis for any expositional passages, cuttings, or transitions that may be needed to help bridge the description of the action.

For example, a second reading of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* reveals a noticeable change in Nora Helmer's language as she begins to assert herself and to strike the "independent woman" pose. In Act Two she begins to use compound sentences and concrete words, and avoids repetition of masculine endings. The pattern of change continues in Act Three, and the discerning reader also notices that Nora now communicates her frustration and despair in compound-complex sentences, refutes her earlier views, and engages in word play with her husband.

The critical evaluation of the second reading of Ibsen's play should suggest adjustments that must now be made in both performance and staging. The highchairs suggested by the first reading would now appear inappropriate, and the whining voice that distinguished Nora in the initial impression is no longer right for the woman who chooses to leave her husband to search for her "own full freedom."

*Continued Reading: Polish*

Continued reading, in group or individual sessions, helps to polish the interpretation of the literature and to provide the reader with maximum identification in terms of the characters, actions, attitudes, and moods described by the author. For example, continued reading of *A Doll's House* should reveal more clearly the father-daughter relationship of Nora and Torvald Helmer, the psychological motivation that prompts Nora to leave her husband and children for a life of her own, the significant shifts in mood and attitude that punctuate the climactic build of the play, and the degrees of alternating tension and relaxation which characterize the scenes between Nora and Torvald in Acts One

and Three.

When incorporated with critical analysis, frequent re-readings may also (1) provide the inspiration for creative staging that provokes a theatrically stimulating response, (2) sharpen listener perception and understanding, (3) reveal the movement necessary to convey the author's intent, (4) suggest ideas for costuming, (5) define the physical activity that will clarify the action described, and (6) encourage the use of the voice and the body to give life and added dimension to the performance.

Such comprehensive analysis is essential to the interpretation and staging of the literature, and may mean the difference between achieving an inspired, innovative production instead of a dull, pedestrian one. Indeed, a detailed and discriminating analysis of the literature should suggest most of the meaningful and perceptive performance and staging possibilities that help listener and performer alike to visualize the action and character in their own minds.

## Scripting of Literature

Once the literature has been selected and analyzed, the next step is the scripting. Basically, scripting for Readers Theatre depends on external concerns such as desired length of program, available talent, limitations of the playing area, and the occasion for which the script is being prepared.

### *Plays*

Plays are rather convenient to adapt for Readers Theatre, of course, because they are written purposely for stage production and contain all of the dramatic elements necessary for staging. The primary problems involved in scripting plays are cutting to an acceptable time limit and visualizing the action in terms of the Readers Theatre principles of subtlety and suggestion, which are explained later.

The instructor may wish to delete individual lines or entire scenes. The instructor may assign each major role to a single performer, and either combine minor roles into one supporting role or assign various minor roles to several performers. Although a specific act and scene division is not needed in the adaptation, a so-called narrator figure may relate the needed exposition or description to the audience. Spoken transitions between selected episodes may also be needed so that the listener is aware of the scene progression. Overall, the principle of adapting plays for Readers Theatre should be that the final product clearly reveals the author's intent, maintains the basic elements of character, and progresses with dramatic impact from an initial episode

to a climactic conclusion.

*Short Stories*

The short story is the most popular literary genre for Readers Theatre adaptation because of its relatively short length and explicit descriptive passages. Roles may be assigned on an individual basis for so-called story names, and a narrator may be employed to provide exposition and description. If the story is primarily descriptive, with only occasional passages of dialogue, the instructor may wish to consider two or more narrator figures and provide more characters by having implied thoughts, recollections, or reflections spoken by individual performers.

For example, in adapting Thomas Mann's short story "Mario and the Magician" for Readers Theatre, the instructor is immediately aware of the author's simultaneous use of the past and present tense in describing the events. Episodes relating to the past may be read by one narrator figure and those relating to the present may be read by another. Within the descriptive passages there is implied thought which suggests the character's reaction to the situation, recollection of the character's past, and reflection on the character's anticipations of the future. These thoughts, recollections, and reflections may be assigned to separate performers to provide greater insight into the author's thematic design—and more roles for the production.

*Poems*

Long poems have an inherent dramatic nature and may be adapted to tell a story by using groups of narrators, or they may be suitable for individual line division among several performers. Short poems are an excellent source of material for solo performance, and they also provide exceptional transitional material for plays, short stories, or novels. Short poems may even be compiled to feature a favorite author—for example, "An Evening with Robert Frost"—or for a full-length program on a selected theme—for example, "Poems of Freedom." Scripting a program that uses poems promotes excellent group work and provides an opportunity to survey a variety of poets, especially when the class is divided into small discussion sessions with the responsibility of selecting representative poems that summarize the thought of a particular poet.

*Novels*

Adaptation of the novel for Readers Theatre is similar to that of the

short story, but presents special problems because of length. The instructor may choose to adapt representative episodes or simply the thread of action that appears to give the novel its unity. Performers generally play a variety of roles and there may also be a series of individual narrators for selected scenes. For example, in adapting Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* for Readers Theatre, the instructor may choose either to dramatize only those adventures in which the main character participates or to dramatize those actions that give the character meaning and form. Individual narrator figures could be used to introduce each adventure scene and individual performers could be used to portray the characters involved in each of the actions. In any event, the instructor is reminded that adaptation of the novel demands that the episodes or actions selected for dramatization should remain faithful to the author's overall perspective as it is revealed in the entire work.

### *Combinations*

So-called original script may also be fashioned from a combination of sources, using essays, poems, letters, song lyrics, newspaper articles, short stories, dramatic monologues, diaries, advertisements, and a host of other dramatic materials. This approach to scripting a Readers Theatre production usually involves a stated thematic concept or an implied production metaphor.

The combination of these apparently miscellaneous materials usually begins with a narrator who expresses the theme, followed by individual selections of literature performed either as an ensemble or solo. There is also the creative opportunity in the combination script for using musical transitions, dance sequences, and projections to bridge separate pieces of literature.

In summary, regardless of the method used in scripting literature for Readers Theatre, the final product should (1) have a beginning, a middle, and an end; (2) reveal character insight and purpose; (3) maintain an energetic movement toward a climax; (4) promote audience stimulation and perception; (5) suggest variety and ingenuity; (6) have a strong sense of the theatrical; (7) provide the visual and aural stimuli necessary to awaken the listener's imagination; (8) promote opportunities for creative staging; (9) encourage audience participation; and (10) remain faithful to the author's point of view.

## Interpretation of Literature

The interpretation of literature in Readers Theatre depends on the compatibility of the performer's voice and body to suggest the meaning

of the author's words. It is the simultaneous use of these fundamental performance instruments that evokes the imagery, action, and characters inherent in the literature and also helps to distinguish the Readers Theatre performer from the stage performer.

### *Conceptualization*

In responding to words and phrases with voice and body simultaneously, the Readers Theatre performer must first conceptualize the suggested image as his own so-called mental symbol before attempting to give character to a vocal and physical expression. What is involved in this process is exemplified in these lines from Wilfred Scawen Blunt's "The Wisdom of Merlyn."

> Scared at thought of the end, at the simple logic of death,
> Scared at the old Earth's arms outstretched to hold thee again,
> thou child of an hour, of a breath,
> Seeking refuge with all but her, the mother that comforteth.

In conceptualizing these lines, the Readers Theatre performer may form a mental image of death as symbolic of the time when childhood fears of the darkness produced apprehension and terror. Recalling those childhood nights, the performer responds with a disturbed whisper on the line, "scared at the thought of the end." The performer then displays excitement and agitation upon reading "the old Earth's arms outstretched" to "hold," as though still in the grip of darkness during a childhood nightmare. Another gesture might to be to reach out trembling hands toward the listeners while pleading in a childish manner, much as the performer might have done as a child, seeking a mother's comfort against the terrors of the night.

Whatever the individual interpretation that results from the initial conceptualization, the performer-character association is perhaps the student's first empathic identification and response to literature. This should stimulate the performer for further exploration of character development, and should lend credibility to the performance. Performer identification with the character may also stimulate the listener to respond similarly, resulting in a shared experience and bond of understanding between performer and listener that makes communication of the literature inspiring and exciting.

### *Word Play and Physicalization*

Another approach to securing a meaningful characterization and vivid terpretation of the literature is to use word play and to "physicalize"

the selection. Learning these techniques is necessary if the performer is to direct listener attention to a specific thought, emotion, or action. The voice and body need to work together if the author's words are to be perceived by the listener in a way that expresses the author's intention. A positive response to the adjectives and verbs in the literature helps the performer to identify the image and to project the author's idea.

Word play, as used here, pays particular attention to adjectives and encourages the performer to respond with a vocal suggestion of the qualities expressed by these modifiers. Awareness of adjectives in the literature also helps to distinguish and identify words and phrases for the listener by the manner in which they are spoken, and polished word play often gives vocal color to characterization. For example, the vocal response to the line "a serious student" may be a downward slide in pitch to imply the true nature of the student being described, whereas the line "an extraordinary woman of some consequence" may call for an upward step in pitch to convey substance and social position. The instructor should follow the approach outlined in Exercise 15 when experimenting with different ways of illustrating word play in literature.

Physicalization, on the other hand, pays special attention to verbs and encourages the performer to respond to the physical movement inherent in these action words. Studying the verbs in the literature clarifies for the performer the degree of muscular involvement or tension and relaxation that is necessary to portray the suggested action. For example, the performer's physical response to the line "sitting quietly in reflection" does not call for as much muscle tone or active movement as does the line "leaping wildly from the chair." The creative performer in Readers Theatre should be able to use bodily actions equally well in both these lines, enabling the listener to visualize in the subtle movement what might easily be seen in the actual movement of a stage performer. The instructor should follow the approach to physical movement as detailed in Exercise 11.

### Vocal Complementaries

The interpretation of literature should also consider the basic vocal complementaries which may be employed to give added dimension to characterization. For purposes of general discussion, the vocal complementaries may be said to include pitch, rate, and volume. When these elements work in harmony with connotations or denotations of the author's words, the performer provides the listener with a more intriguing and complex character sketch than may otherwise be possible. Likewise, when the vocal complementaries work in harmony with the

action suggested by the literature, the performer provides the listener with a composite portrait of character which is authentic and dynamic.

Pitch refers to the location of sound on the musical scale, and is generally noted as high, medium, or low. Noticeable variety in pitch is essential if the performer is to convey the shades of meaning or subtext suggested in the literature. Changes in pitch also give emphasis and significance to individual words and phrases, and may reflect the subtle mood or attitude necessary to give added dimension to character.

Rate refers to the speed with which words are uttered, to the length and frequency of pauses that separate the sequences of speech. Variety in rate is as important as variety in pitch and helps the performer to establish the relationship between words and phrases or convey units of thought. Rate may also be used to build suspense and gives a sense of rhythm, or tempo, to both the performance and the production.

Volume of course refers to the loudness or softness of the voice and is a necessary ingredient for projecting sound to the listener so that it is heard and understood. Variety in volume focuses listener attention on significant changes in character attitude, and is an effective means for intensifying the emotional or intellectual context of the literature.

## Staging of Literature

One of the primary principles of staging in Readers Theatre is to localize, or place, the action and the character in terms of physical space. Creative staging in Readers Theatre also gives the listener-viewer a frame of reference in space with which to associate the action and the character, and is the most graphic medium available to depict the analogous relationship between action and character.

### *Focus*

One of the tools available to the instructor in staging the literature is focus, or character placement within or without the playing space. On-stage focus directs the performers to relate to one another within the designated playing space, and encourages direct eye contact between characters, overt movement, vocal interaction, and physical intimacy (see Fig. 1).

Offstage focus places the location of the scene, and of course the characters involved, in the midst of the audience, as if the action described in the literature were happening among the spectators (see Fig. 2).

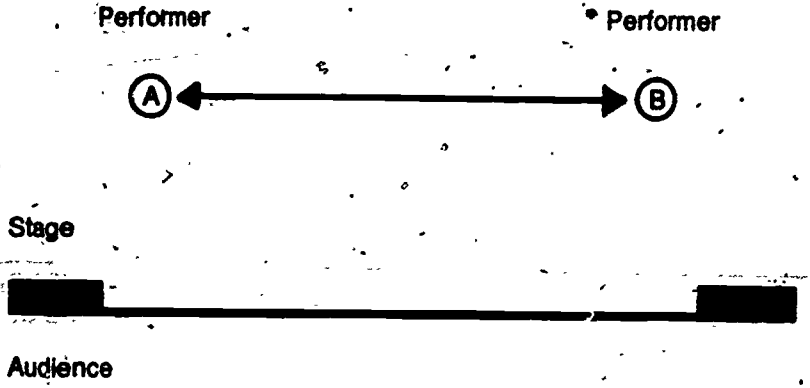


Fig. 1. Onstage Focus.

The use of offstage focus demands that the performers relate to one another as though they were "in" the audience, and their vision, action, and dialogue are directed over the heads of the listeners, intersecting at a hypothetical point in the center of the auditorium or listener seating arrangement.

As a principle of staging, offstage focus places the performers in a full-front position facing the audience and encourages responsive facial expressions, suggestive movements, and vocal reactions that appear to be directed toward an imaginary point at the back of the auditorium just above the listeners' heads.

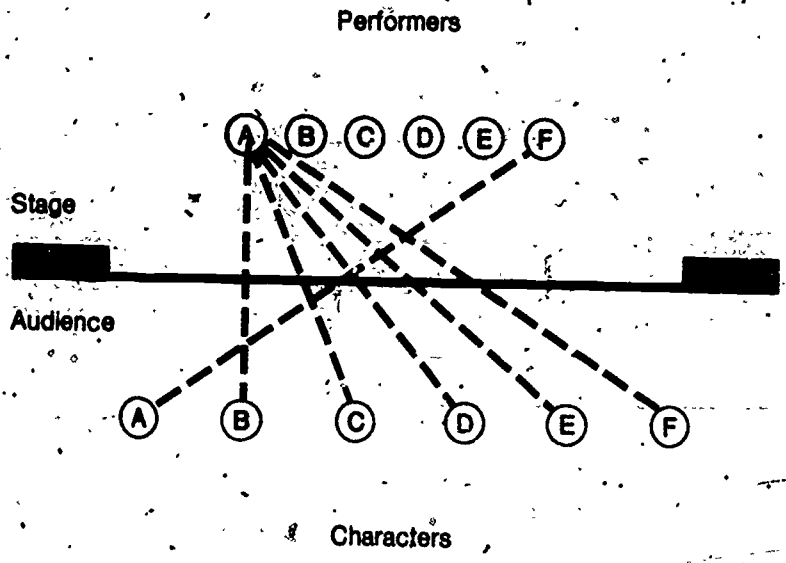


Fig. 2. Offstage Focus.

Offstage focus is a powerful device for intensifying the shifting moods and attitudes inherent in character relationships, and provides the distance and dramatic effect necessary for scenes of confrontation or emotional involvement. The face-to-face positioning of performer and listener also reinforces the basic theoretical notion that Readers Theatre is primarily a mind experience. Thus the performer must seek to fill the empty aesthetic space between playing area and audience with symbolic stances or pictorial poses that aid the listener's perception of image intended by the literature.

*Combined Foci*

A third approach to staging is to use a combination of foci for special effect, in a manner that does not call attention to itself. If the sudden alternation from offstage to onstage focus distracts or disrupts listener concentration or perception, the combination has not been used effectively and does not achieve the desired special effect.

Some examples of this approach to staging are: (1) a change of focus to heighten humor in James Thurber's "The Little Girl and the Wolf," h a narrator placed offstage and the little girl and the wolf placed

onstage for the frantic chase through the woods to grandma's house; (2) a change of focus to accommodate difficult stage business in Shakespeare's *Othello* with the strangling of Desdemona taking place onstage as a narrator speaks Othello's dialogue offstage, to suggest the stirrings of conscience; or (3) a change of focus to highlight the author's point of view in Helen Keller's *Three Days to Live,* with two performers on opposite sides of the playing space using offstage focus to suggest duality of character, and four performers wandering aimlessly in a circle using onstage focus to suggest the utter darkness and futility of sightless existence, as the author describes it in this particular selection.

*Movement*

The role of movement in Readers Theatre should be a basic concern of the instructor, and should be employed whenever it is illustrative or adds dramatic dimension to the literature. Movement is essential for (1) suggesting changing character relationships, (2) revealing a variety of moods and attitudes, (3) creating a dramatic sense of motion that reinforces and redirects the listener's understanding of and identification with the literature, (4) providing an energetic tempo for the production, and (5) externalizing the story line of the literature.

When used creatively, movement may also crystallize the listener's perception of abstract or symbolic points of view as expressed by the author. For example, in T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," having the performers stagger forth to pronounce themselves "stuffed" and "leaning together" in a swaying motion like "wind in dry grass"—if clearly motivated, energetic, and subtle—may be effective in conveying the pessimism intended by the author.

Although it is sometimes best to encourage the performers to improvise and discover their own patterns of motion and gesture, the beginning instructor may wish to experiment with metaphorical movement, which is based on the concept that manner of movement is implied within a given selection. The selection may be given added significance by having the performers move in a definite or choreographed fashion that corresponds to the words or the ideas expressed in the literature. Exercise 16 suggests the role that metaphorical movement may play in giving character to the interpretation of literature.

Regardless of the degree of movement suggested in the literature, however, the beginning instructor should be cautioned that there must be a balance between movement that enhances or enlivens the experience described by the author, and movement that sets the scene in the listener's imagination: All other impulses for movement should be carefully controlled, keeping in mind that extraneous or extensive

movement soon diminishes the desired effect of directing the listener's attention to a specific locale or character for a specific response.

### *Physical Arrangement*

Besides determining the focus and degree of movement that may be incorporated in the staging of the literature, the instructor should entertain thoughts of the physical arrangement of the performers within the playing area.

As mentioned earlier, performers may stand, sit, or group themselves in suggestive poses for individual or group selections. Scripts may be held, placed on lecterns, or blended into the performance of the literature as objects that reflect the action being described. The physical arrangement of the performers also includes directorial and artistic decisions regarding line and height. For example, using levels or raised platforms in a staging of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" can reflect the elevation of spirit and aspiration of soul so poignantly noted by the author.

Creative use of line in the placement of the performers may also be of value in helping the listener to associate the setting with the action. For example, the straight-line arrangement of performers, or even of chairs and stools, used in staging Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" may connote the solemnity and formality of the situation as the author recalls it. Using a semicircular arrangement for a staging of E.B. White's delightful children's story *Charlotte's Web* can also be effective in conveying the spider's retreat.

In making practical or creative decisions regarding the arrangement of performers, the instructor should refrain from pictorial placements that inhibit movement or prevent access to the entire playing area. Rearrangement and realignment of performers during the production provide the tempo and visual emphasis necessary to direct listener attention.

### *Playing Spaces*

The playing spaces most conducive for a Readers Theatre production are essentially the same as those of traditional theatre practice: arena, proscenium, and open. Whichever space is chosen for a particular production, the instructor should recall that one of the principles of Readers Theatre staging is to visualize or actualize the implicit image in the literature. Usually the primary image of a given selection suggests the analogous space that is most appropriate for staging the piece; and all elements of staging and design should be unified to reinforce and ...plify the use of space in interpreting the literature.

The arena, or in-the-round, space surrounds the action on all four sides of the performer and is especially useful to suggest confinement or to establish intimacy with the audience. The proscenium space defines the action in a presentational manner, with the performers located within the framework of the traditional theatre arch and the audience at some distance in the auditorium.

An open space, by far the most flexible staging for Readers Theatre, more nearly defines the action in a three-dimensional setting than either the arena or the proscenium space. This openness of staging also adapts extremely well to classroom areas where productions might take place. The basic arrangement of open space staging places the performers in the center of the action as in the arena stage, but provides a backdrop, usually a decorative curtain in back of the playing area, against which the listener may focus attention as the action proceeds.

The open stage also provides needed elevation of the performers on a raised platform and allows for more pictorial suggestion and symbolic grouping than either the arena or the proscenium stage. In addition, the open space stage permits different scenes to be performed at various locations within the playing space simultaneously, and it is particularly well suited to original, compiled programs that rely upon several genres of literature to suggest a common theme.

Although these are the three spaces generally used in a Readers Theatre production, the instructor should be aware of the rather recent movement toward framing the literature in so-called found or environmental space. Environmental space embraces a large, open area without a stage or fixed seating and encourages performers and listeners to intermingle. In this concept the listeners may move from place to place to observe the action, or they may actively participate in the action by assuming a role as performer.

Found space moves the literature itself to a locale that suggests the setting described by the author. In this concept, familiar places like parks, playgrounds, corridors, or woodlands become staging areas for the action described by the author. For example, Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe" is staged in an abandoned field, Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* is staged in a deserted park, or Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is staged in a music recital hall with "witching chords" playing "pulse pizzicati" softly in the background.

*Lighting*

Lighting helps to endow an empty space with mood and stimulates listener participation in the literature by focusing attention on setting and character. It also helps reveal the rhythmic nature of the structure

or highlight the action of individual episodes. Lighting may even be used to signal abrupt changes in thought and attitude or to establish the progression of separate scenes.

*Music*

The auditory element of music is a rather subtle approach to setting a specific mood for a Readers Theatre production. Music may be interwoven as a thematic device to provide needed transitions, to underscore poignant scenes, or to punctuate the action. The singing or chanting of the performers as they accompany themselves on melodious instruments may also add dramatic impact. For example, John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" lends itself quite nicely to the musical addition of lutes played softly as background "narrative."

*Costumes*

Costumes, either suggestive or overtly theatrical, are essential elements of any Readers Theatre production and help to identify and define character. Costumes should reinforce the stated production concept and should be an integral part of the overall production. The difficulty of changing costumes when several characters are portrayed by a single performer has led many Readers Theatre directors to rely on the use of various hats, scarfs, shawls, hand props, or costume fragments such as capes, aprons, blouses, or even sportcoats to convey change from one character to another.

*Visual Aids*

Slides and projections may be valuable additions to the Readers Theatre production if they help to underscore the mood, clarify the action, or reinforce the author's point of view. The probable drawback of slides and projections is that they may prove distracting and interfere with the listener's visualization of the action. When used wisely and with discretion, however, these media may set the scene for the literature and personalize the listener's anticipated response to the action being described. For example, slides and projections may be used in the same fashion as traditional set pieces in introducing the listener to Langston Hughes' "Downtown," with appropriate portraits of Harlem in the 1940s being revealed at selected points in the narration; or the listener's personal association may be anticipated by using newspaper or magazine slides and projections to document Megan Terry's chronicle of *Viet Rock*.

*Sound Effects*

Various sound effects, like musical interludes, may be used to point toward changes in scene, to dramatize sudden shifts in character attitude or mood, and to suggest editorial commentary related to the apparent author point of view. For example, the recorded sound of a honking horn may help to signal the change from imagination to reality in James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty," or the recorded sound of a slowly-beating heart may add psychological significance and dramatic impact to an interpretation of Edgar Allen Poe's "The Telltale Heart."

Sound effects may also be supplied by the performers, and the creation of live sound may achieve a sense of artistic harmony that balances word and sound to suggest unity of thought and action. For example, Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* may feature Civil War songs reinforced by suggestive sounds of battle and rhythmic marching produced by the performers.

*Make-Up*

Because of the value of facial expression in the suggestion of character, the role of make-up in Readers Theatre is usually reserved for symbolic or abstract production that seeks to present unreal or fantasized character. These unreal effects may be achieved by false hair, masks, or clown white stylizations. Make-up in Readers Theatre may, however include a light pancake to give the performers a healthy coloring. The beginning instructor should remember that in Readers Theatre single performers often must play a variety of roles within a given program, and that distinctive or character make-up often curtails this practice.

# 2 Practice: Selected Exercises

Although no simple formula exists for incorporating the theory of Readers Theatre into every classroom assignment, the selected exercises in this section should provide the foundation needed for further exploration and experimentation. The instructor should approach the selected exercises in a manner that is comfortable and appropriate for an individual style of teaching, and should take the creative liberty of adjusting or extending the exercises to meet the special needs of individual students.

Each exercise is framed as a working blueprint to stimulate student awareness of the principles of Readers Theatre staging, to provide the

basic ingredients of vocal and physical performance of literature, to promote development of believable characterization, and to stimulate student appreciation of the mechanics involved in bringing a scripted program of literature to life in classroom performance.

The instructor is encouraged to supplement the selected exercises with active class discussion, and to promote an atmosphere of relaxed inquiry so that the principles of Readers Theatre may be seen rather than merely heard.

**Exercise 1: Prop Probe**

*Goals.* To explore the properties of vocal sound in general, to introduce students to the principle of special effects that may be created by the voice for creative performance of literature.

*Approach.* Before beginning this exercise it is necessary to stockpile a variety of items capable of conducting the human voice. The instructor may gather the items or instruct the students to search for all or some of them. Examples include cardboard tubes from paper products, garden hoses, vacuum cleaner attachments, megaphones, plastic jugs, mouth mufflers, scuba masks, paper bags, tea bags, or soda cans.

Begin the exercise by having the students present their found objects individually to the class. Have each student use the object to make a noise, then ask each to pronounce a word, using the object as a mouthpiece. Then give each student a witty quotation or a pithy phrase to voice with the object—for example, Mark Twain's humorous suggestion that ". . . familiarity breeds contempt . . . and children," or George Moore's sober reflection that "After all, there is but one race—humanity." Other sources might include Benjamin Franklin, popular song lyrics, Bartlett's quotations, Shakespeare, or book titles.

After the students have been given an opportunity to demonstrate the object and to voice a quotation, repeat the exercise without the found object. Encourage each student to duplicate the sound produced by the object with the natural voice so that a series of vocal "special effects" is created. The exercise may be given added dimension if it is combined with Exercise 6 and staged as an improvised performance using familiar literature.

**Exercise 2: Carry Your Character with You!**

*Goals:* To develop an awareness of the role of movement in suggesting character, to capture the element of uninhibited abandon that frees

a student's imagination, and to suggest the role that physicalization plays in the interpretation of literature.

*Approach.* Select thirteen, or twenty-six, students at random and ask them what is their favorite letter of the alphabet. Then present them with the following selection by an anonymous poet of the 17th century entitled "*A* Was an Archer."

*A* was an archer, and shot at a frog.
*B* was a blind man, and led by a dog.
*C* was a cutpurse, and lived in disgrace.
*D* was a drunkard, and had a red face.
*E* was an eater, a glutton was he.
*F* was a fighter, and fought with a flea.
*G* was a giant, and pulled down a house.
*H* was a hunter, and hunted a mouse.
*I* was an ill man, and hated by all.
*J* was a jackass, locked in its stall.
*K* was a knave, and he robbed great and small.
*L* was a liar, and told many lies.
*M* was a madman, and beat out his eyes.
*No* was a nobleman, nobly born.
*O* was an ostler, and stole horses' corn.
*P* was a pedlar, and sold many pins.
*Q* was a quarreller, and broke both his shins.
*R* was a rogue, and ran about town.
*S* was a sailor, and knavishly bent.
*T* was a tailor, a man of renown.
*U* was a usurer, took ten percent.
*V* was a viper, serpent-like.
*W* was a writer, and money he earned.
*X* was a Xenophon, prudent and learn'd.
*Y* was a yeoman, and worked with his hands.
*Z* was one Zeno the Great, but he's dead.

The instructor should define any unclear words so that each student understands the selected phrase, and then each student is directed to approach the playing area in alphabetical order.

In the playing area, the student should first strike a pose that is representative of the alphabet character, and then recite the phrase associated with the character in a voice thought to be appropriate for the action described. The student should then follow through with an action that is suggested by the alphabet character and end by freezing in the final pose that completes the suggested action.

For example, student performer *A* might enter the playing area very cautiously as though stalking some invisible prey, spy the object of the search and draw an arrow to thread an imaginary bow, release the arrow after reciting the line associated with the character, and freeze with feet apart, hands relaxed, and shoulders slightly tensed.

Each remaining student repeats the process until all the letters of the alphabet have been performed and frozen character sketches are lined up across the playing area in suggestive postures that reflect the action in the poem.

**Exercise 3: Book Parade**

*Goals.* To familiarize the student with the potential for using the book or bound script as a creative object, and to promote awareness of character attitude in hand-held manuscripts.

*Approach.* Having discussed the possibility of using the held script as an extension of the action described in the literature, the instructor should select several students and ask them to move to the front of the classroom.

Begin the exercise by making sure that each student is holding a book, a vinyl folder, or any other form of manuscript of the literature used in a performance. Call out specific environments, such as a restaurant, hospital, church, nursery, kitchen, or playground, and ask the students to use their held manuscripts to suggest the named environment. The students may respond, for example, by holding their books in a horizontal manner toward the audience to suggest the tray associated with a restaurant; or they may cuddle their scripts in their arms like teddy bears to suggest a nursery. The important principle in this part of the exercise is that the suggested object be clearly recognized for what it is supposed to represent.

Next, select several more students and ask them to move to the front of the classroom. Call out specific character occupations, such as farmer, grocer, banker, construction worker, professional entertainer, baseball player, or policeman. Ask the students to use their held manuscripts to suggest the object associated with the occupation. The students may respond, for example, by "hoeing" with the book to suggest the farmer, or they might "sing" with the manuscript as a microphone, to represent the professional entertainer. The important principle here is that the student performers learn to extend their sense of character by using the held script to suggest the nature of the character's occupation.

Now, select several more students and ask them to move to the front of the classroom. Call out specific moods or attitudes that might be found in literature, such as love, anger, glee, frustration,

joy, despair, or loneliness. Ask the students to use their held manuscripts to suggest the mood or attitude called for. The students may respond, for example, by caressing their folders to suggest joy or by covering their faces with them to suggest loneliness. The important principle in this part of the exercise is that the student performers allow the mood or attitude to be reflected in the manner in which the script is held.

When confident that the class is aware of the role that this technique may play in the performance of literature, present the students with a selection of poetry or prose that contains a definite environment, interesting character occupations, and a variety of moods or attitudes, and encourage them to perform individually, using the book or folder whenever appropriate, to portray the environment, character, and mood or attitude as suggested by the literature.

**Exercise 4: Sardines Today!**

*Goals.* To promote student awareness of poetic setting, and to encourage the dramatic visualization of a suggested space or setting that might be found in literature.

*Approach.* Several days before class, have the students search the school building for interesting nooks and crannies into which the entire class might barely fit. Have each student select and memorize a short poem or a stanza from a longer poem that would be appropriate to the space and the literature selected. For example, Richard Lovelace's pleading "To Althea, from Prison" is ideally suited for performance in a cramped hallway, and James Taylor's "Traffic Jam" is exceptional when performed in a broom closet!

On the day of the assignment, the class moves from each nook and cranny selected, and the students perform their literature surrounded by their classmates. The class then reassembles for discussion, and evaluations are made concerning the appropriateness of the choices and the role that space may play in the dramatic visualization of literature. The exercise may later be repeated as a group project, with programs of scripted literature performed in other settings that suggest the specific locale of the literature.

**Exercise 5: Name That Tune!**

*Goals* To acquaint the student performer with the role that rate of speech may play in clearly delineating character in both poetry and prose, and to demonstrate how vocal variety may suggest mood or attitude of character.

*roach.* Obtain music that represents a variety of rhythms that

might correspond to analogous character moods or attitudes—for example, disco music for an energetic mood, waltz music for a mellow mood, or country and western music for a sad mood.

1. Choose a poetry or prose selection that suggests the variety of moods that are included on the tape or record.

2. Have the students read the selection to the rhythm of the music, moving, it is hoped, from a slow cadence to a concluding upbeat after several minutes, so that rate of speech has had an opportunity to change pace in response to a variety of musical speeds.

3. Repeat the exercise by turning off the music and having the students perform the literature aloud, in groups or as individuals, at vocal speeds that suggest the rhythm of the previously recorded music.

4. Repeat the exercise again by having the students discuss the role of musical rhythm as it is related to suggesting alternating character mood or attitude, and then perform the literature so that the chosen rate corresponds to the mood or attitude expressed by the author.

**Exercise 6. Vocal Traffic Jam**

*Goals.* To develop a sense of dramatic imagination in the performance of literature, to promote flexibility of the voice and the body in performance, and to demonstrate the ensemble approach to group performance.

*Approach.* Select a poem or a prose cutting that contains a variety of sounds that help to suggest the action, and have the students examine the selection individually for possible vocal additions that might further help the listener to visualize the action. Each student makes a list of the sounds and points out the word or line where the sound is found. After all students have presented their lists, the class arrives at a consensus regarding which sounds are to be included in a performance of the literature. The selection is then marked with breath marks as described in Exercise 7, to indicate these places in the literature where a prolonged pause might permit the addition of sound to clarify the action described.

Students may then be divided into groups to perform the literature. One student is a solo performer, pausing at the breath marks indicated, and the other students provide the agreed upon

sounds. This ensemble approach to performance is then repeated with other selections—for instance, James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" or Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows*—using the same process of sound addition in groups as they have just done individually.

**Exercise 7: Take a Breather!**

*Goals.* To review the basic principles of the breathing process, and to highlight the need for breath control in the so-called sound-making cycle of voicing sounds in meaningful word play in characterization.

*Approach.* Have the students lie on their backs on a level surface such as a floor or a tabletop. Place a small, hard-covered book about the size of a standard dictionary at the belt or waistline of each student, so that it rests comfortably on the abdominal muscles. Have the students place their hands under their heads, stretching the abdominal muscles; then have the students elevate their heads just enough to permit viewing both the book and the abdomen.

1. Have the students hold their breaths for ten seconds, simultaneously moving the book up and down using only the abdominal muscles. Instruct the students to observe what is involved in the breathing process as the book rises and falls, perhaps supplementing the observation with some technical terms related to the breathing apparatus. Now have the students relax and breathe for ten seconds. Repeat this cycle ten times, alternating the observation and relaxation.

2. Now combine the breathing and the movement of the book into one fluid motion. Instruct the students to inhale slowly to the count of ten, pushing the book upward with the movement of the muscles. Then have the students slowly exhale to the count of ten, allowing the book to return to its original position.

3. Now have each student repeat step 2 ten times, concentrating on the rhythm of the breathing process needed to raise and lower the book. The end result should be controlled, disciplined breathing necessary for the flexible vocal qualities used in word play to suggest character, mood, or attitude.

Continue the exercise by having the students stand upright with relaxed arms at their sides. Begin the second part of the exercise by

having each student count in a whisper as high as they can on one exhalation.

1. Repeat the exercise by having each student slowly increase the number of counts whispered on one exhalation. When each student has reached 25, instruct them to relax.

2. Now repeat the exercise and instruct each student to count in full voice on one exhalation, stopping when each student has again reached the number 25.

Conclude the exercise by having the students stand with their hands firmly gripping their lower ribs. Instruct each student to place the thumbs to the rear and to point the fingers forward.

1. Students then inhale and exhale fairly deeply, so that the lower rib cage pushes against their hands on each inhalation.

2. As they inhale, point out the outward movement of the hands.

3. As they exhale, point out the inward motion of the hands.

4. Now have each student read aloud from the following selection. Instruct them to take a slight pause at each place indicated by (/) and to take a single breath at each pause.

from "The Tyger," by William Blake

Tyger!/ Tyger!/ burning bright
In the forests of the night,/
What immortal hand/ or eye/
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?/

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?/
On what wings dare he aspire?/
What the hand dare seize the fire?/

And what shoulder,/ and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?/
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand?/ and what dread feet?

When confident that each student is breathing freely for the pauses and sustaining the breath control needed to speak without choking or gulping for air, have each student read from the following selection. Instruct them, however, to pause for a breath only at those places marked (*).

from "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," by Nathaniel Hawthorne

On turning the corner of the narrow lane, Robin found himself in a spacious street,* with an unbroken line of lofty houses on each side,* and a steepled building at the upper end, whence the ringing of a bell announced the hour of nine. In his progress, Robin encountered many gallant figures. Embroidered garments of showy colors,* enormous periwigs, gold-laced hats, and silver-hilted swords glided past him* and dazzled his optics. Travelled youths, imitators of the European fine gentlemen of the period, trod jauntily along,* half dancing to the fashionable tunes which they hummed, and making poor Robin ashamed of his quiet and natural gait.

**Exercise 8: To Yell, or Not To Yell!**

*Goals.* To present the basic principles of "voicing" a character by developing an awareness of vocal variety, volume, and projection.

*Approach.* Working with a poem of four to six lines, divide the students into groups of five. Have each group decide its order for performing the poem and begin the exercise with the first group entering the playing area.

The first student of the group voices the poem in the lowest possible whisper that may still be heard and understood by the listeners. The second student voices the poem in a slightly louder volume, the third student in a somewhat louder volume, and so on until, finally, student five yells the poem.

Following a discussion of what was appropriate volume for the selected literature, group two enters the playing area. The first student of the group voices the poem with the lowest possible pitch that may still be heard and understood by the listeners. The second student voices the poem in a slightly higher pitch, the third student in a somewhat higher pitch, and so on until, finally, student five voices the poem with the highest possible pitch.

Following a discussion of what was appropriate pitch for the selected literature, group three enters the playing area. Each student of the group voices the poem in both the volume and pitch necessary to project, or to direct, the literature to all areas of the audience. This

may be done on an individual basis—with the first student projecting to the right of the playing area, the second student projecting to the left of the playing area, and concluding with the fifth student projecting to the entire audience area—or it may be done in unison, with the five students exercising the ensemble approach to use the volume, pitch, and projection necessary for good vocal variety and for gaining listener attention.

**Exercise 9: Mirror, Mirror on the Wall**

*Goals.* To develop an awareness of offstage focus and to direct the student performer in the placement of characters in the audience.

*Approach.* Choose a selection of literature that contains both dialogue and action, for performing with offstage focus. For each character represented in the literature, place a full-length mirror on the wall at the back of the classroom so that the individual performer is revealed from head to foot. If full-length mirrors are unavailable or a room with wall-to-wall mirrors cannot be located, the exercise may be directed toward the facial expressions of individual characters as they are seen in offstage focus.

The performers within the playing area establish a relationship with the characters in the audience by informally chatting with them and by noticing their physical characteristics. There should be a review of the techniques of offstage focus so that the performers recall the specific point of intersection to which they are to direct dialogue or action when addressing and reacting to a character placed offstage.

Begin with an informal recitation of the literature so that the performers begin to feel comfortable with the convention of addressing someone standing next to them as though they were in the audience. Remind the performers to observe the facial and physical reactions of the characters they address, and that they are to respond to the action described in the literature within a very confined space.

Re-read the literature and concentrate on suggesting the vocal and physical characteristics that will distinguish one character from another. Encourage the performers to respond to the action being described, and to pay special attention to the adjectives and verbs that may help the literature come alive in performance.

When confident that the performers are precise in their use of offstage focus, and that each performer has captured a viable suggestion of the character in terms of what is said and done in the literature, remove the mirrors and perform the selection again. Follow this performance with an inquiring class discussion, to point

out the differences in performance with the mirrors and without; and note the believability of each performer's handling of action using offstage focus in comparison with the use of mirrors.

**Exercise 10: Book Ends**

*Goals.* To stimulate the student performer to visualize words and to introduce the element of pantomime into the dramatization of action suggested in literature.

*Approach.* Begin the exercise by dividing the class into groups of three. Present each group with a slogan, a quotation, or a popular public-service message. Some examples are: the slogan for the airline commercial, "Up, up and away!"; Shakespeare's pithy suggestion to "eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath"; or the public-service warning, "Turn off the juice when not in use." Instruct the groups to devise a creative pantomime that makes clear the action described in the material.

Now instruct the groups to perform the pantomime without any verbal identification or suggestion. Follow each group performance with an inquiring discussion to determine whether the listeners were able to visualize the words as they were suggested by the pantomime. Pay particular attention to an evaluation of the pantomime in terms of its energy, degree of suggestion, detailed spelling-out of the action, and overall effectiveness in communicating the idea contained within the material.

Now instruct each group to surround their pantomime with the spoken text of the material. Reinforce the Readers Theatre principle that in performance of literature the words of the author are surrounded by the action suggested.

This "book-end" approach to the exercise places one performer in the center of the group presenting the pantomime to the accompaniment of the words spoken by the other two performers, who are located left and right of the playing area.

Once the students associate the pantomimed action with the suggestion of the author's words, the instructor may wish to expand the exercise to include group readings of narrative prose or drama.

**Exercise 11: The Body Beautiful!**

*Goals.* To encourage students to physicalize the literature in terms of suggestive body reactions and to promote the animation and abandon necessary to give character to a dramatization of the literature.

*Approach.* Divide the class into groups of four, labeling each group

with a humorous name that corresponds to a part of the body—for example, the Crazy Legs, the Pin Heads, the Lazy Feet, or the Sleepy Arms.

Call the members of each group to the front of the class individually. Point out the need to use all parts of the body in reacting to the literature, and stimulating the listener's understanding of the action described. Then begin to call out specific actions or bodily activities that suggest movement, and ask the students to respond to the suggestion, using their respective group labels. For example, the Crazy Legs might be asked to respond to action words such as *running, jumping,* or *skipping;* and the Sleepy Arms might be asked to respond to activities such as *yawning, stretching,* or *scratching.*

In the discussion that follows each group's efforts to overtly physicalize the actions called for, the instructor should encourage the students to recall the degrees of tension, relaxation, or movement of the individual parts of the body involved in the previous responses. Care should be taken to point out that physicalization must be as authentic and believable as the real motions involved in such actions or activities. Conclude the exercise by presenting the class with a prose selection such as Joseph Conrad's *The Lagoon* or Dr. Seuss's "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas." Have the students first chart the possibilities to physicalize suggested actions and then to present the selections as part of a Body Beautiful! day with an invited audience.

**Exercise 12: Dress Up Day!**

*Goals.* To present the student with an opportunity to explore the role of suggestive costuming in Readers Theatre, to suggest the place of an ensemble approach in the dramatization of literature, to demonstrate the role of the narrator in scripting literature for performance, and to provide an opportunity for staging literature.

*Approach.* Divide the class into groups of seven and have each student within each group decide which of the parts is most appealing to perform in the following selection from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Group members are then instructed to bring to class for the performance (1) a suggestive costume piece, such as a hat or a scarf, and (2) a suggestive hand prop, such as a briefcase or glasses, that best suggests their chosen character. Set aside class rehearsal time so that each group may memorize its lines and decide on its approach to staging the literature. The narrator may serve as a character in the production or may be an idle spectator, who only introduces the literature. If possible, place the groups in different rehearsal spaces

to reduce the temptation to imitate.

Following the group performances, there should be an active discussion regarding the suitability of individual choices of costume or props for particular characters, and of the creative role that costumes and props may play in helping to dramatize the literature.

Conclude the exercise by presenting each group with another selection of literature. Have them divide the lines, select a narrator, decide on appropriate staging, choose suggestive costumes or props, rehearse for two weeks, and then invite their parents and friends for an evening performance.

from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

*Narrator:* All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

*Reader 1:* At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

*Reader 2:* Then the whining school-boy,
With his satchel and shining morning face,
Creeping like snail unwillingly to school.

*Reader 3:* And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow.

*Reader 4:* Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth.

*Reader 5:* And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances.

*Narrator:* And so he plays his part.

*Reader 6:* The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound.

*Narrator:* Last scene of all,

*Reader 3:* That ends this strange eventful history,

*Reader 5:* Is second childishness

*Reader 1:* And mere oblivion,

*Reader 6:* Sans teeth,

*Reader 4:* Sans eyes,

*Reader 2:* Sans taste,

*Narrator:* Sans everything.

**Exercise 13: Put on Your Face!**

*Goals.* To acquaint the student with the need to communicate mood or attitude with facial expressions and to suggest the need for facial expressions to help clearly define character.

*Approach.* The instructor begins the exercise by writing on slips of paper a variety of moods or attitudes that might be suggested by facial expressions—for example, angry, fearful, happy, amused, inquisitive, sad, disappointed, expectant, bored, and cunning. There should be enough slips of paper for all in the class. The slips are placed in a "smile/frown box" (or a hat) and the students are asked to draw individually when it is their turn to perform. The first student moves to the playing area and uses the face only to suggest the selected mood or attitude. When the observers have guessed the

mood or attitude, a second student selects a slip and the process is repeated until all students have had an opportunity to communicate a mood or an attitude by using only the face.

Now the students are given a selection of literature containing a variety of emotions or moods and attitudes and are asked to combine appropriate facial expressions and vocal qualities to dramatize the literature. The exercise may be expanded to include a physical response to the selected mood or attitude, so that what emerges in the final performance is a harmony of voice and body that expresses a given feeling or thought.

**Exercise 14: Move, but Stand Still!**

*Goals.* To develop an awareness of the degree of suggestion necessary to communicate action to a listener, and to promote the discipline of confining action within a limited space so that the listener is prompted to use the imagination to complete the suggestion made by the performer.

*Approach.* The instructor should select three students from the class and direct them to react to an improvised narrative with complete freedom of movement. The original narrative of the instructor should include descriptive words that encourage the students to engage in meaningful action, such as *running, skipping, stumbling,* or *falling,* and should provide opportunities for the students to use the entire space available in the classroom. For example, the following narrative might serve as a model of what is needed to stimulate the student's use of movement within a large, open space.

> Imagine it is a hot, dusty day in July. *(The students begin to suggest perspiration.)* You are walking down a dusty, dirty road. *(The students begin to walk around the classroom, and there may be coughing.)* The air is hot and still and the sun beats down upon your head. *(The students suggest the increasing perspiration and heat.)* Suddenly, you sight a pond at the edge of the road! *(The students halt and direct their focus toward the imaginary pond.)* You rush toward the pond eagerly, *(The students dash toward the location of the imaginary pond.)* and climb the high fence that encloses it! *(The students climb nearby chairs.)* You take off your shoes and stick your aching toes into the cooling water. *(The students remove their shoes and suggest the refreshing coolness of the water on their feet.)* Without warning, a passing farmer shouts. "Hey, you! Get out of there!" *(The students respond with a startled reaction, quickly gather up their*

*shoes, and scramble away in different directions!)*

Now, review with the students the role that physicalization plays in suggesting action, and point out that the performers in Readers Theatre usually do not engage in such overt movement in the performance of literature unless they are employing onstage focus. Then continue the exercise by asking each participant in the narrative to hold a book or folder, to re-create the same physical reactions previously experienced, to provide as much dialogue or narration as they can recall, and to move, but stand still!

What should emerge from this exercise is the basic Readers Theatre principle that the performer suggests movement, without actually moving from one area of the playing space to another as is common in traditional stage performance. In re-creating the narrative supplied by the instructor, the student should use the book or folder creatively to suggest any of the environment recalled, should add vocal characterization to the dialogue of the farmer who suddenly appears, should rely upon physicalization to suggest the action described, and should confine the performance to a limited space.

This particular exercise also lends itself quite nicely to an introduction to third-person narration, and may be extended by having any student who has observed the exercise come forward and, as the narrator figure, perform individual recollections, including narration and dialogue, of what happened.

**Exercise 15: I Beg Your Pardon, What Did You Say?**

*Goals.* To promote an awareness of the role that vocal variables play in suggesting character, to encourage active word play in the interpretation of literature, and to reinforce the need for subtlety in character development.

*Approach.* Begin the exercise by giving the students copies of the selection shown below. Instruct them to voice the word to achieve the desired meaning as indicated, using the vocal variables of pitch, rate, and volume, and also to relate the list to one specific character-type who comes to mind. The list is then performed individually in front of the class with the chosen character-type speaking in a variety of suggestive meanings.

No? (What was that you said?)

No? (You can't mean that, can you?)

| | |
|---|---|
| No? | (How dare you!) |
| No. | (We'll see about that!) |
| No. | (Well, if that's the way you feel.) |
| No. | (I'm sorry, I forgot to do that.) |
| No? | (Does this mean it's over for us?) |
| No? | (You weren't with someone else?) |
| No! | (I absolutely refuse!) |
| No. | (But thank you anyway.) |
| No! | (I'm not interested in doing that.) |
| No. | (You must be kidding.) |
| No! | (I told you before, I'm not interested.) |
| No? | (I could be persuaded.) |
| No? | (Are you positive?) |

Now continue the exercise by matching characters in groups of two. Have the students repeat the list in the following manner: The first student's character voices the first meaning of the word and the second student's character responds with the second meaning of the word. The alternation of character responses to the desired meaning of the word continues until the list is concluded.

The exercise may be extended, however, if the instructor presents the class with a variety of short cuttings from a drama, with two characters involved in a conversation that suggests a subtext to their relationship—that is, an implied interaction existing beneath the surface of the spoken language. Examples useful for this purpose are the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the tea scene in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the photograph album scene in Milan Stitt's *The Runner Stumbles*, the pledge of allegiance scene in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, or the seduction scene in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*.

In this extended exercise the student performers should again use

pitch, rate, and volume to suggest the implied meaning, and should concentrate on the subtlety involved in developing meaningful word play. The instructor may also wish to combine this part of the exercise with Exercise 9 to review the basic principles of offstage focus.

**Exercise 16: Bring a Friend to Class!**

*Goals.* To promote student understanding and appreciation of the role that observation plays in development of believable character, to suggest alternative sources of role models in developing three-dimensional character, and to provide an opportunity to engage in metaphorical movement.

*Approach.* The instructor should present the class with a selection of literature that provides an opportunity for many and varied characterizations and directs the students to select one character from the literature to perform. Representative examples for this exercise include Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Leo Tolstoi's *War and Peace*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*.

The instructor may adapt the script, or choose to extend the exercise by forming the students into groups of five or six and having them spend several days adapting a representative scene for performance. Regardless of the approach elected, however, the students are then instructed to observe closely, with a critical eye, the actions of those with whom they come in contact in the next five days. Those to be observed may include parents, teachers, friends, casual acquaintances, or strangers.

Following this period of detailed observation, and supplemented with an analysis of the character as reflected in the literature, the students are to select the mannerisms, gestures, movements, vocal qualities, and distinguishing personal habits of those observed which best reflect the analysis of their chosen literary character.

It may also be of value to the observation and resulting performance if the student is able to discover in the analysis a metaphor, or implied comparison, between the character and something inventive, and to incorporate such complementary features into the performance blueprint. For example, an analysis of the character Leah in Joyce Carol Oates' narrative novel *Bellfleur* might suggest the performance metaphor of "ostrich"; a detailed analysis of the character Tetley in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's historical saga *The Ox—Bow Incident* might well suggest the performance metaphor of "knight errant"; and a perceptive analysis of the character Tull in

William Faulkner's mystical *As I Lay Dying* could result in the performance metaphor of "an uncurried horse awaiting death."

On the day set aside for the presentation of the selected literature, each student should bring a friend to class, and introduce the friend in the words and actions of the character as detailed in the performance.

**Exercise 17: The Zoo Story**

*Goals.* To acquaint the student performer with alternative sources for character development and to promote creativity in movement and action.

*Approach.* Encourage the students to visit a zoo, a park, or any other area that might house a variety of animals. Instruct the students to observe the animals in their natural habitat, and to note the peculiar habits which distinguish one animal from another. The detailed observation might, for example, make mention of the animal's eating habits, level of intelligence, awareness, and movement patterns; or the observation might include specific notations related to personality traits, temperament, and physical appearance.

When the students have concluded their observations and presented the findings to the class, instruct the students to reduce their animal studies to a suggestive portrait of an analogous human being and to translate the individual animal characteristics into a suggestive character performance of Robert Benchley's *Family Life In America,* Terry Siegel's *Fun with Hamlet and His Friends,* George Orwell's *Animal Farm,* Edward Albee's *American Dream,* or William Goldman's *The Princess Bride.*

The performance that results from a visit with the animals should capture individuality in both movement and action, and should suggest to the student performer that observation and creative application of the traits of all persons and objects that surround daily activities are fit material to develop and incorporate into meaningful character portraits.

**Exercise 18: The Touchy-Feely Box**

*Goals.* To acquaint the student performer with the use of hand props to suggest character and to develop an awareness of theatrical complementaries that may be of value in performance.

*Approach.* Begin the exercise by reviewing the role of hand props in helping to suggest character and then unveil the "Touchy-Feely Box," which is a brightly decorated cardboard container used to store assorted hand props such as mirrors, fans, scarfs, eyeglasses,

walking sticks, or jewelry that might be used suggestively to help define a character.

Instruct the students to bring to class the following day a small hand prop which is to be placed in the now empty Touchy-Feely Box. When the students have placed their hand props in the cardboard container, each is presented with a short poem or paragraph of prose which contains a character in need of definition. Examples of selections which might be used include Lord Byron's "She Walks in Beauty," Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel,* Aldous Huxley's "Young Archimedes," Browning's *My Last Duchess,* or Yevtushenko's *Encounter.*

Each student then approaches the Touchy-Feely Box and reaches inside to touch and feel for a hand prop that best suits the character described in the short poem or paragraph distributed by the instructor. The student then performs the selection and incorporates the hand prop whenever appropriate to help define the character.

The exercise may be extended by having each student select other literature for performance and bring to class a representative hand prop which helps to bring the character to life. The instructor may also choose this exercise to approach the topic of suggestive costuming for performance, and encourage each student to wear to class an outfit which best suggests the character-type described in the literature.

**Exercise 19: Musical Character Chairs**

*Goals.* To acquaint the student performer with the basic principles involved in using pitch, rate, and volume to suggest more than one character in the performance of literature.

*Approach.* The instructor begins the exercise by reviewing the basic principles of pitch, rate, and volume, and explains how variety in these vocal variables aids in the development of a clearly defined character.

The students are then divided into groups of four and presented with a cutting of drama that contains four distinct character types. Each student is assigned one of the characters in the cutting and is responsible for using pitch, rate, and volume to vocally distinguish his character from the other three.

The first group moves to the front of the classroom and four chairs are placed in a circle. The instructor asks each student to read the character's dialogue aloud so that the listeners may evaluate whether the chosen voice is distinct in terms of the vocal variables. When satisfied that each student has given individuality and distinction to the character assigned, the instructor removes one chair from

the circle and turns on taped or recorded music. The four students begin to circle around the three chairs and scramble for a seat when the music is abruptly stopped. Those who secure seats then assume the role of the student who was left out, and the dialogue is repeated for the listeners. This time, however, each student who remains is responsible for assuming the voice of the departed gamester, and must now give individuality and distinction to two voices in the drama.

The exercise continues until only one student remains, and that student now assumes the voices of all four characters described in the drama. But in the process of voicing all four characters, the sole survivor has gained the basic knowledge of the vocal variables needed to clearly delineate a variety of characters. And the listeners have enjoyed an interesting variation of the popular children's game!

# Suggested Readings

## Textbooks


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Young, Jerry D. "Evaluating a Readers Theatre Production." *The Speech Teacher* (January 1970): 37-42.

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