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READERS THEATER

Presented to
Mr. Dennis Holt, Sr.
For the Course
Honors Special Studies
H490 Spring 1970

by
Sherry Gail Reynolds

Readers Theater

Readers Theater or Theater of the Mind, as it is sometimes called, has a varied nature and a dual origin. Basically, Readers Theater is a medium in which two or more oral interpreters through their oral reading cause an audience to experience literature. Definitions of Readers Theater vary somewhat, yet agree on basic principles. Johnny Akin of Denver University has called it "a form of oral interpretation in which all types of literature may be projected by means of characterized readings enhanced by theatrical effects." Keith Brooks of Ohio State University has said, "Readers Theater is a group activity in which the best of literature is communicated from manuscript to an audience through the oral interpretation approach of vocal and physical suggestion.

In his definition of oral interpretation, which lies at the heart of Readers Theater, Don Geiger of the University of California at Berkeley has singled out certain considerations which are particularly pertinent to the latter: ". . .oral interpretation, then, is an unformulable amalgam of acting, public speaking, critical reaction, and sympathetic sharing." Most writers who have expressed their ideas on the subject all seem to agree that the

essence of Readers Theater is creative oral reading which calls forth mental images of characters enacting a scene that exists primarily in the minds of the participants-- both the readers' and the audience's.

The presentation of a Readers Theater and that of a conventional play differs in that the former demands stricter attention to the aural elements of the literature. The interpreter must express the emotions, the attitudes, and the actions of the characters by economically using his face, his voice, and his body as vocal and physical clues to meaning. Nothing he does should distract the audience's attention from the characters, the scene, and the action within the interpretation.

Another difference is in the type of participation which Readers Theater requires of its audience. The audience must generate its own visualization of the scenery, the costumes, the action, the own visualization of the scenery, the costumes, the action, the make-up, and the physical appearance of the characters. These are all usually presented on the stage in a play.

Thus, since so much of the performance depends upon the mental creativity and contribution of the audience, Readers Theater may well be called the Theater of the Mind.

This oral art form is not new, but the impetus of its revival and resurgency is comparatively recent. The roots of Readers Theater may be traced to the dramatic practices of fifth-century Greece. According to Eugene Bahn of

Wayne State University:

There . . .arose in Greece . . .a recitative art. This was carried on by wandering minstrels known as "rhapsodes." The rhapsode spoke, in a measured recitative, portions of the national epics. Sometimes he read to the accompaniment of a lyre or other primitive musical instrument. . .there was a form of dialogue carried on between two characters, read by two rhapsodes. One would read, in the first book of the Iliad, up to the quarrel of the princes; then a second reciter would step forward and declaim the speeches of Agamemnon while the other read the part of Achilles. . .

The rhapsodes did not always confine themselves to the epic poems. They also read the didactic and gnomic poetry of such writers as Hesiod. . .When these poems, which were read by one person, had more than one character in them, a type of activity which approaches the art of the interpretative reading of plays was developed. When . . .two characters were read by two different individuals, the drama began.*

Drama and interpretive reading sometimes were united in medieval times too. Church liturgy was amplified by the addition of mimetic action, symbolic costume, and the suggestion of dialogue through antiphonal chant. While this would seem to describe the drama more than it does the Readers Theater, it should be remembered that the Easter trope was at first "a simple chanted colloquy between voices of the choir, signifying the two Marias and the responding angel."*

From this and similar scholarly research, it can be seen that theater and interpretive reading have a common background. In Readers Theater they come together again. Today, artists in both theater and oral interpretation are turning to this unique and challenging medium, experimenting with its possibilities, exploring its many facets. This dual approach to Readers Theater is the source of some controversy regarding the form a particular presentation should take. Those teachers and directors who have an

oral interpretation orientation usually require their readers to carry a written script and read aloud from it, whereas theater-orientated directors agree on memorization of lines as the natural approach. Similiar arguments arise over whether the readers should relate directly to one another and look at each other on the stage, and whether music, movement, and lighting should be used. Fortunately for the medium, there is no final arbiter on these questions, and lively experimentation is continuing.

This so-called debate on the limitations of Readers Theater is of special interest to me because of a recent encounter with the problem. In presenting Spoon River Anthology at a tournament last year, we encountered a judge who had completely opposing opinions from our director. As a result, needless to say, we were criticized unmercifully for our shameful "destruction" of the material. The very fact that the judge did not really know enough about Readers Theater to realize that there are differing attitudes and approaches to the production shows that the art form has been neglected, in full analysis, not only in that particular judge's education, but probably in the education of many others.

It seems that the selection should determine the style more than anything else. Some selections lend themselves to movement, character involvement (interaction between different characters), lighting and music, whereas other selection seem to come off better if these elements are

ignored. The important thing to remember is that, it must be mentioned again, no final arbiter on these questions has been found, and lively experiment is continuing.

An understanding of Brecht's Epic Theater may help to explain Readers Theater, or Concert Theater as he called it, since the two are much alike. Brecht invented his Epic Theater form because he wanted his audience primarily to think, to become intellectually involved. He wanted to keep his audience from becoming so emotionally involved in the characters that they no longer evaluated the significance of the thoughts being presented. Readers Theater also demands a thinking audience, but it also demands an emotionally involved audience.

Brecht, in searching for a new relationship with his audience, used many of the compositional and presentational elements employed in Readers Theater: he utilized a narrator to tie segments together, to verbally set the scenes, to comment upon and interpret the action; his actors portrayed more than one role; and his stage was a platform with few properties. Each scene existed for itself; but when the scenes were taken together, they presented a broad overview of a major premise. He, too, demanded a thinking audience; but contrary to the aim of Readers Theater, Brecht sought to avoid emotional involvement on the part of the audience.

The possibilities of this medium have not yet been fully realized or exploited. Relatively new on the contemporary scene, Readers Theater is free for experimentation and

open to the use of imaginative techniques for bringing literature to an audience. As Allardyce Nicoll has said, "Almost always we find dramatic genius flowering when a particular land in a particular age discovers theatrical form that is new, adjusted to its demands, and hitherto not fully exploited."* Readers Theater, again, is not a substitute for conventional theater and is not intended to be. It is a different form, with a focus on the written word. With few exceptions, it centers the audience's interest on the author's text. Since it is not limited to the play form, it can bring to the stage a far greater range of literary materials than conventional theatre. This is Readers Theater. . . Theater of the Mind.

*This was based on research primarily with the help of the Readers Theatre Handbook by Leslie Irene Coger and Melvin R. White, various textbooks (Riley Library is void of any specific books on Readers Theater) and personal experience.