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THE RHETORIC OF READER'S THEATRE

Presented to
Mr. Dennis Holt
Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Special Studies
of the Honors Program

by
Tom Roberts
May 1970

Mr. Johnny Aiken 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."¹ Among the myriad of definitions of theatre's estranged art known as Reader's Theatre, this one seems to sum up my philosophy of what it actually is. In this paper, I purpose to take three steps in establishing what I believe is the true rhetoric of Reader's Theatre. Firstly, I want to enhance an agreeable definition which I have partially done thus far. Secondly, I want to discuss the long disputed question of what the interpreter's rightful role in Reader's Theatre should be. And finally, clarify the most recent philosophy of the position of locus in Reader's Theatre.

I have previously mentioned Mr. Johnny Aiken's somewhat simplified, but very agreeable definition of Reader's Theatre. It would be wise for the student of interpretation to examine a more technical definition. For instance, Dr. Wallace A. Bacon, professor and chairman of the Department of Interpretation of Northwestern University defines our specialized art form as follows: "Reader's Theatre . . . embraces the group reading of material involving delineated characters, with or without the presence of a narrator, in such a manner as to establish the focus of the piece not onstage with the readers but in the imagination of the audience. . . ."²

¹A Denver University brochure announcing a contest for Reader's Theatre scripts (1962).

²Wallace Bacon, The Art of Interpretation (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc. 1966) p. 311.

In this definition, Dr. Bacon emphasizes the primary difference between Reader's Theatre and conventional theatre. This differentiation is created by the fact that the focus of the literature is not onstage but in the imagination of the audience. It is at this point that contemporary oral interpreters have deviated to a certain degree. However, I shall discuss that in the third step of my analysis.

To provide an acceptable definition, neither too simplistic nor too technical, I think that Jenre³ Veilleux presents a most appropriate one of oral interpretation (the medius of Reader's Theatre) in his text, The Re-Creation of Literature.

Oral interpretation is the art of creating a literary work . . . through the medium of oral reading by an interpreter to an audience. It is not acting, impersonation, mimicry, or pantomime, though at times it may embody elements of each of these arts. Beginning with the printed page, and preceeding through . . . the interpreter . . . re-create for the listener the intent and accomplishment of the author in a unique way."³

Now that I have established a reasonably adequate definition of Reader's Theatre, I now move on to the second step of analysis. This is the interpreter's role. Is the interpreter an actor? Or is he merely some omniscient device employed by the director? Throughout the course of my research, I think that I can answer affirmatively to both questions, but I must place the interpreter in his proper role as "middle man". Jenre³ Veilleux, in his discussion of the interpreters role supports my conviction. He writes:

The interpreter's role . . . appears to be that of middle man. He is one who reads from the book to the audience. And we might expect the interpreter to be merely a neutral or passive agent; it is the author who really tells the story to the audience. Although one of the keys to successful interpretation does lie in the apparent neutrality of the interpreter, this . . . is only a carefully

³Jenre³ Veilleux, Oral Interpretation: The Re-Creation of Literature (Harper & Row, New York, Evanston, London 1967) p. I.

created illusion. In reality, it is only through the interpreter that the story can become fully alive for the audience⁴

One must recognize the importance of the interpreter in making the literature "come alive." He may do this by embracing the other art forms of acting, impersonation, and pantomime. If indeed, the interpreter's role is to re-create literature, then he must utilize the best means possible to do so; yet not deviate so much as to corrupt the specialized form of Reader's Theatre. There exist in Reader's Theatre, one distinctive element that cannot be excluded. Coger and White point this out in their differentiation of Reader's Theatre and a conventional play: "A Reader's Theatre presentation differs from a conventional play in that it demands stricter attention to the aural elements of the literature."⁵

In other words, the locus which is created by the presence of the aural elements must be in the audience to a certain extent in order for it to be Reader's Theatre. This, of course, has brought me to my third and final step in my analysis of the rhetoric of Reader's Theatre. Where does locus really belong?

In discussing locus I want to define it as the point of attention. In Reader's Theatre one normally thinks of the primary point of attention to be in the mind of the audience. However, I want to advance two presumably contrasting opinions at this point. The first is that locus should be totally offstage; i.e. in the audience. Those who hold this opinion believe that "true" Reader's Theatre must not be characterized by conventional theatre in that the interpreters are not affected to the

⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵ Leslie Coger and Melvin R. White, Reader's Theatre Handbook (Scott, Foresman & Co., 1967) p. 4.

point that they draw attention to themselves. On the other hand, the second opinion is that locus should be divided between offstage and onstage. This naturally presents a very complicated problem.

I am totally in support of the second opinion i.e. locus should be divided between onstage and offstage. In substantiation of this, I refer once again to one of the foremost authorities in this field, Dr. Wallace A. Bacon.

Drama is meant to be performed here and now Certain things in the text of a play may require onstage explanation: the drawing of a dagger, the taking of a potion, if these are not explained in the words of the play itself; and it sorely is futile to confuse an audience by refusing to give onstage explanations of this sort simply because we have defined Reader's Theatre as having locus offstage.⁶

Furthermore, Dr. Bacon emphasis that whenever something in a play is meant to be seen--rather--than heard--Reader's Theatre is required to put it onstage. Therefore, Reader's Theatre moves back and forth between onstage and offstage locations.

This will seem to some people a confusion or denial of form, but it is not really that The confusion, if there is any, is in the minds of those who seek to define Reader's Theatre in so limiting a fashion as to leave it rigid and stultified.⁷

In our discussion of locus, we must, however, make sure that the appeal does not become always primarily visual so that the scene of the reading is fixed onstage. If it were totally onstage, it would destroy the uniqueness of Reader's Theatre.

In conclusion, one must appreciate the uniqueness of the Reader's Theatre form in order to understand its rhetoric. Essentially this rhetoric is the fact that not only the interpreter, but the audience as

⁶ Bacon, op. cit., p. 312.

⁷ Ibid.

well, experience literature by participating. Therefore, the reader has noted what Reader's Theatre is in its most accurate definition; what the true role of its medium is; and finally how the audience may experience the literature through the discussion of locus.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

A Denver University brochure announcing a contest for Reader's Theatre scripts, 1962.

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