



Pitfalls in Reading Drama

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Pitfalls in Reading Drama

Robert C. Lambert

Also concerned with the teaching of drama, Mr. Lambert describes five major problems students face in reading a play. The author is a member of the English Department at Western Michigan University.

WE LIVE in a playhouse starved land. Since the United States lacks a coherent Federal theater program, and since road companies play only the larger cities, it is literally impossible for hundreds of thousands of students to experience live theater. Even in city and suburban schools, the playgoing student is a rarity. However inadequately, the English classroom must substitute as a stage that will create new interest in drama.

All too often teachers deaden any student interest in theater—a natural interest since until recently plays were written for the same mass audience that now abundantly consumes TV and motion pictures—by means too often of the annual one-shot exposure to (or more fittingly inoculation against) Shakespeare. Many teachers assign a class the first act of *Macbeth* to read without preparing them for the extremely arduous and mind-stretching task of reading any play, much less one by Shakespeare. Drama is far from the self-contained form of the short story or novel; indeed, reading a play silently is far more like reading the score of a musical composition: the instruments, the sound, the rhythm, the timing—even the silences—must be imagined.

In four years of teaching drama to both high school and college students, I have observed these five major problems that face students in reading drama silently.

(1) *The monotone of the mind's ear.* In silent reading, the reader "hears" the

words of the writer in a monotone—much as you are probably doing now. People read faster than they speak because, in part, they do not "hear" the stammerings, pauses, and hesitations of ordinary speech. While this smoothness is fine for reading an essay, it vitiates the very purpose and form of dramatic dialogue, which is often to show a character in action facing the ambivalences of outward and inward conflict. For much dramatic dialogue, a stammering hesitation is the proper mode of delivery, and this is totally lost if the mind races over the dialogue to *hear* it with the fluidity of an E. B. White essay. This is precisely the way a reader unfamiliar with dramatic convention will read, thereby destroying the effect of dramatic dialogue.

(2) *Pause, rhythm, and gesture.* In drama, a sudden silence can have the effect of an exclamation mark or a bomb-shell: the ten-second, doom-laden pause that should occur after the struggle as Othello towers over the murdered Desdemona, or the despondent, sagging silence that accompanies Willy Loman as he first shuffles on stage weighed down by sample cases and failure. Yet these silences—electrifying when experienced—are usually lost in reading. Similarly, little of the rhythm of playing—the staccato interchanges between John and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, or the stichomythic intensity of charge and countercharge in Sophoclean drama—is perceived unless very specific preparation is made by the teacher be-

fore assigning a play to read. Further, gesture must be imagined, or the frenzied twitching of Nora's tarantella (in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*), actually the symbolic foreshadowing of the death spasm in her intended suicide, goes unnoticed.

(3) *Lighting and sound*. Very seldom in teaching drama is attention paid to these two elements of spectacle. The unfortunate disappearance of radio drama has resulted in a dulling of imagination's ear (Who can fail to remember the creaking door on *Inner Sanctum Mystery*?), so the teacher must emphasize the rumbling reverberations—both audible and symbolic—when Nora closes the door as she leaves Helmer's house for a new life as a woman *and* as a human being. The sound of her leaving, with all that her decision implies, has aptly been termed "the doorslam heard 'round the world." And the flicker of the TV tube can never equal the blazing arc light illumination of the stage in the final scene of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, when the sun rises burning away the gloomy Norwegian mists only to illuminate Oswald—the sensitive artist in love with light and life—blinded by inherited syphilis and unable to see the splendor all about him.

(4) *Symbolic foreshadowings*. Except for the theater of the absurd, most plays are carefully constructed so that characters act coherently. Playwrights, as well as novelists, are careful to plant hints of future developments and symbolic foreshadowings to make the play's action seem inevitable, credible, *right*. Seeds planted in Act One must flourish in Act Three. The more literary skills of perceiving hints and foreshadowings can be taught easily in drama, since the limited length of a play makes it easier for students to remember a hint dropped one act—rather than fifteen chapters—earlier. Even by superficially examining the opening four lines of *A Doll's House* (chosen because Ibsen remains a conventional playwright concerned with prob-

lems that are still contemporary, such as the emancipation of women from the feminine mystique), the compactness of exposition and the amount of thematic foreshadowing is awesome.

NORA: Be sure and hide the Christmas tree carefully, Helene, the children mustn't see it till this evening, when it's all decorated. (To the Porter, taking out her purse) How much?

PORTER: Fifty, Ma'am.

NORA: Here you are. No—keep the change.

(Nora . . . takes a bag of macaroons out of her pocket and eats a couple, then she goes cautiously to the door of her husband's study and listens) Yes—he's home. (She goes over to the table right, humming to herself again.)

HELMER (From his study): Is that my little lark twittering out there?

In just these four lines Ibsen establishes the time of year, the extravagance (or generosity?) of Nora, her dual position of wife and mother. Further, he suggests some other things. Her eating of macaroons is a clue to her childishness. Her husband's calling her a lark is a hint of his condescending attitude toward her. By calling her *lark* or *squirrel* he constantly reduces her to the status of a pet or scampering animal with neither brain nor moral stature. Ibsen's setting reinforces the pretentious middle class quality of Helmer's life: "Engravings on the walls. A whatnot with china objects and various bric-a-brac. A small bookcase with books in fancy bindings."

(5) *The director's interpretation*. As in music, no production of a play is ever the same twice. Like a conductor, a director never sees a play in the same way as does another director. Since each reader is essentially his own director, the factors of personal taste and judgment enter into reading drama. Ask the student: "How would you interpret this line? That scene? These events? Does

Helmer say 'Good-bye' to Nora hopefully, despondently, angrily?" On these seemingly small points hang the vision and meaning of the play.

Dramatize Problems

The problems I have raised and analyzed are not really separate but concurrent: gesture takes place during speech amid light and sound that foreshadow future event—all in the context of a director's vision. Although these problems in reading can and should at first be treated separately, they must be combined, fused so that finally one has an overall vision of the play in a theatrical context.

The best way to do this on a manageable scale is to beg, borrow, or kidnap two or three live actors to read a scene from a play the class has already read—or misread—silently. A highly satisfactory scene for this purpose is the last ten minutes of *A Doll's House*, since it involves only Helmer and Nora. The only other props needed are a table, a door, and two rings—items never absent in any classroom. But because this scene is the highly charged climax of the play, nothing must mar the dramatic intensity of the reading: the actors must rehearse lines, gestures, and pauses. If no actors are available, talented students from the class or school should be drafted, but under no circumstances should Susan Shy and Marvin Mumbles perform the scene: psychodrama has no place in a scheme to prove to students the excitement and passion live performance can generate. And the intimate nature of the classroom will help any reasonably competent performer establish that electric tension that distinguishes live theater from its canned counterparts. Further, this particular scene can stress gesture—in the mute exchange of rings—and silence:

HELMER: I'd gladly work for you day and night, Nora—go through suffer-

ing and want, if need be—but one doesn't sacrifice one's honor for love's sake.

NORA (Three-second pause): Millions of women have done so.

To stress the damage bad directing or sentimental misreading can wreak on a play, I direct my actors to replay the last fifteen lines as if there were really a chance Helmer could change and Nora would return:

NORA (Hopefully despite the sense of the line): O Torvald! I no longer believe in miracles, you see.

The violence this interpretation does to the integrity of the play is immediately evident, and the fallacy of the imposed *happy ending* in literature is made vivid. (Ironically, to satisfy irate directors who, "knew what the public wanted," Ibsen himself had to pen an alternate, happy close to the play.)

Possible Alternatives

If no live actors—student or otherwise—are available, phonograph records may be helpful. At least the rhythm of dialogue and the significance of pauses and sound effects can be stressed. Nevertheless, nothing can substitute for a live actor. Films are inadequate, since the nature of the medium is basically different from live theater, as anyone who has experienced the dullness of a filmed play can testify. The camera, rather than the words or the actors, is the central figure in almost any movie, and the technical problems are those of continuity, cutting, camera angle, and dissolve. To be sure, film technique deserves study in its own right—especially in an era when the only literature non-verbal students experience is from vacuum tube or screen—but film can only be used as a foil, not as a substitute, for live theater.

Probably the best way to stimulate the theatrical imagination of a class is to have them work together in preparing a

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marian writes of morphophonemic rules, he is implicitly recognizing the general validity of the details explored by a phonologically oriented grammarian. Similarly, when a phonological grammarian writes of patterning, he is implicitly recognizing the validity of the details explored by the generative grammarian as procedures of linguistic operation. Where the formulations of the new grammarians are complete, the terminology has unrivaled consistency. Because the enthusiastic investigations of recent grammarians are expanding the knowledge about the structure of our language, and because certain aspects of these formulations are incomplete or untried, there is some variation in terminology resulting from differing conceptions. We should all, I think, applaud this growth of knowledge rather than asking, as does Wolfe:

Why, then, do we need a new vocabulary at all? We need rather to simplify

the terminology of traditional grammar and agree on nomenclature, as has been done in France. Instead of reducing nomenclature, however, to a minimum of terms agreed upon by publishers, scholars, and textbook writers, we are expanding grammatical nomenclature by leaps and bounds.

We need the new and expanded terminology to label new concepts. If our knowledge of language were complete, perhaps we could have the comfortable, static situation Professor Wolfe yearns for. Nor can we take refuge in the reasoning that the relevance of this new science exists only for the expert who must complete the body of facts and simplify it for us. It is apparent that linguistic science is far enough advanced in accuracy and compelling enough in content that it may be used to improve classroom language instruction. Let us not reject this benefit for the comfort of the familiar.

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"prompt book" for one scene, or one page of a play, and then have each individual prepare one scene for a "prompt book." These books contain directions for the actors, electricians, and sound effects man, but they need not be technical: they should show that the student is aware of appropriate gestures, vocal inflections, and sound effects. The books primarily serve to engage the full imaginative resources of each playreading student. When the books are finished, the whole class might assemble in the school auditorium to watch and criticize selected interpretations of scenes from the "prompt books."

The purpose of this exercise is not to produce a generation of directors, but rather of informed playreaders who are now ready to go to the only theater in which they can be sure of seeing whatever play they wish—the theater of their imagination. Only then can the teacher assign with any assurance the first scene of *Macbeth*, a play written for a different stage to be sure, but also a play like any other that is vivid and meaningful only when read with full awareness of vocal inflection, stage rhythm, and dramatic gesture.