WE LIVE IN a playhouse starved land.
Since the United States lacks a co-
herent Federal theater program, and since
road companies play only the larger
cities, it is literally impossible for hun-
dreds of thousands of students to expe-
rience 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 stu-
dent 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 an-
nual one-shot exposure to (or more fit-
tingly 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 in-
struments, 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 prob-
lems 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 be-
cause, 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 char-
acter 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 Des-
damona, or the despondent, sagging si-
lence 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 stac-
cato 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 problems 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 suffering 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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morian 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.

Pitfalls in Reading Drama

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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.