

Reading a Drama Text: An Empirical Case Study

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Reception aesthetics and reader-response theory are the two strands of literary criticism to have underlined the reader's active role in the reading process, forming various reader constructs. Moreover, the new field of research has prompted theatre theorists to take a keener interest in the processes of reading and understanding drama texts, as well as to pay attention - especially in the postmodern multimedia civilisation - to the audience's perceptions. The paper presents the results of an empirical case study examining the readers' contact with a selected drama text at several levels of response. Their responses are compared to the perceptions of spectators on attending the performance, and to the spectators' understanding of the production's reading.

Keywords: drama / reception theory / readers / theatre audience / empirical research

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Introduction

Reading ranks among the most complex human activities, as has been demonstrated by a number of studies brought to prominence in the 1970s, a decade which restored to the reader an active role in the generation of meaning. According to these studies, the reader can be described in three ways at least. The first, theoretical, approach presents the relation between reader and text through various models of hypothetical readers, including Wolfgang Iser's implicit reader, Umberto Eco's model reader, Stanley Fish's informed reader, Jonathan Culler's ideal reader, and others.¹ This research places the reader in a larger socio-cultural context, delving into the mechanisms of production and reception governing the reader's generation of meaning. In addition, the findings of psychoanalysis are employed to tackle the reader as an individual, from the perspective of both his/her work and his/her enjoyment of reading. A second possibility is to describe the reader from a historical perspective, involving an analysis of readers and their reading habits and tastes through history or a certain historical period. What is taken into account is social structure, cultural and psychological habits,

political and economic influences etc., as attested by archive sources. The third, experimental, approach is based on theoretical findings applied to the analysis of a particular audience. The material is usually gathered by means of questionnaires, interviews or measurements of the readers' biological functions, and analysed by the empirical method. It is this third approach, then, which foregrounds the concrete, everyday, lay reader, who may be described with a quantitative precision. Since the scholarly conclusions thus arrived at are not abstract, referring as they do to a specific audience (rather than to a reader who is the model of a sophisticated scholar or an ahistorical construct), Peter Dixon has introduced the term 'statistical reader' (Dixon et al. 10). An example of such empirical research, which examines the readers' contact with the text at several reader-response levels, will be presented in this paper, focusing on reading a drama text.

Reception aesthetics and reader-response theory are the two strands of literary criticism to have underlined the reader's active role in the reading process, forming various reader constructs. Their analyses have tended to focus on prose and lyric poetry, while the reader/spectator of a play has rarely been the object of their research.² For all their shortcomings and proneness to criticism, the two disciplines have exercised great influence, both through their new field of research (the third methodological paradigm) and through introducing new concepts, which have proved viable in drama theory as well and have been included in the reflections of emphatically theatre-oriented theorists. Concepts like concretisation, blank filling, horizon of expectations, interpretive communities, model reader, everyday fantasies, enjoyment occur in the works by theatre semioticians as well (including Patrice Pavis, Anne Ubersfeld, Marco de Marinis, Marvin Carlson and others).³

The major difference stems from the very object of research, since the literary communication of drama differs from that of prose or lyric texts: due to its double existential status, drama envisages several types of addressee. The reader thus reads the playwright's text, while the spectator watches a performance; the latter does include the text, but the text as read through the eyes of the director and actors, actualised according to the audience's expectations and habits. It follows that the drama recipient is a triple one, composed of readers, the director and actors (that is, the whole troupe), and spectators.⁴ Both the reader's and spectator's receptive capabilities are taken into account by the playwright in the very process of writing. According to Patrice Pavis ('Teze' 119), drama texts are simply traces of a certain performance practice; while reading, we should envision how their creation was shaped by the limitations of acting and staging. In the post-modern multimedia civilisation, on the other hand, the element of theatre

communication scrutinised by sundry disciplines has been the spectator.

Consequently, my aim was to illumine through research the contact between reader and drama text, as well as between spectator and performance, and to present the similarities and differences between text and performance as reflected at various levels of reader-/spectator-response. The essence of the research is thus not directed at analysing the text and performance, that is, at comparing and evaluating the two, since they are independent media with features of their own. The focus of interest is the recipients' response and the differences between their mental representations based on reading the drama text (that is, the differences between the readers' textual worlds), or on attending the performance and reading the performance text – the production of entire stage systems, which include the drama text: reading the performance text entails grasp of the production's reading of the text. This reading precedes the production itself, making the latter a stage realisation of the reading (Pavis, 'Od besedila' 152). The present study, then, addresses the question of how a text or performance acquires meaning for the recipient – which linguistic signs of the text are decoded by readers and which signs of the performance, linguistic and non-linguistic, are perceived by spectators. Moreover, the empirical study has tested the applicability of certain theoretical concepts.

Problem and Method

In keeping with the research aims, a questionnaire was prepared including quantitative and qualitative questions (YES/NO answers, a five-degree marking scale, arrangement of elements, multiple choice items, independent wording of answers to such questions as Explain, Describe, Enumerate, Evaluate, Substantiate). The questions referred to sundry levels of reader-/spectator-response, that is:

- perception of various drama elements as revealed through the text and/or performance: the protagonists (character, appearance, facial expression and gestures, costume, interpersonal relationships), discourse (perception of the linguistic peculiarities of drama discourse, idiolect and sociolect, manner of speaking, repetition ...), time and place (time and place of action, settings, *mise-en-scène*, materials and colours, objects and props, sounds, noises, music);

- understanding and interpretation (level of difficulty, less intelligible scenes, the basic idea, message of the play ...);

- evaluation and appreciation (general assessment of text/performance enjoyability, favourite scene, dramaturgically weak scene ...);

– comparison between text and performance (the extent to which the performance follows the text, differences between the mental representations formed through individual reading and through the given stage realisation ...).

The research consisted of two parts: the first group of interviewees read the text first and saw it performed later, while the second group saw the performance first, reading the text afterwards. This enabled a comparative study of the degree to which a preliminary reading had affected the perception of performance elements, and vice versa. The research involved 60 first-year students of the Slovene language with completed secondary education, aged 19–20 years, mostly female, and hailing from various parts of Slovenia, which ensured a homogenous sample in terms of age, education and interests. The material was *Ekshibicionist* (The Exhibitionist), a play by Dušan Jovanović featuring themes and ideas which were expected to interest the selected sample of interviewees;⁵ moreover, the play was available for both reading and watching at the time of the research. Directed by Jovanović, it was premiered in the 2001–2002 season at the theatre SNG Mala Drama Ljubljana and published the same year in the accompanying theatre booklet, with the book edition following in 2004.

Research Results⁶

Perception of the constituent parts of the play

To judge by the answers involving the protagonist, the linguistic features and the spatio-temporal dimensions of the play, the interviewees had mostly focused on the protagonist (characterisation, personality traits, facial expression and gestures, costume, complexity ...), as these answers were in the majority. The answers of those who had read the text in advance gave the impression of being more exhaustive, precise and reflective in the above categories, but the questions were not posed decisively enough to warrant an authoritative conclusion. They do, however, suggest that these interviewees were less preoccupied with the plot itself, which enabled them to focus more attentively on the performance elements listed above, with the exception of linguistic peculiarities, objects, props, other scenic elements, such as materials and colours, or music; the perception of these elements was generally weaker, and not even the familiarity with the plot ensured by a preliminary reading channelled attention to these performance segments. The most striking features were the vulgar expressions used by Jimmy, a prison guard, and the frequent use of technical terms by Eva, a psychiatrist.

Most other linguistic traits were noticed by fewer than half of the readers and a third of the spectators; the results for the other characters were lower still, while one fourth of the interviewees either left a blank or replied that they did not know the answer, could not remember it, or had not paid attention to the linguistic features. Therefore the readers/spectators had trouble identifying the functions of these elements and their correlation within the performance: such questions were repeatedly answered with *I don't know*, or not at all. As for channelling the spectator's attention, our case confirms both basic premises cited in Marco de Marinis' study 'Dramaturgija gledalca' (Dramaturgy of the Spectator) (189–204), one of the rare papers addressing an issue so fundamental as the question of how the varied and scattered elements are pieced together by the spectator into a harmonious and meaningful performance – that is, the issue of perception. Since theatre art has the greatest claim on the recipient's sensory abilities, the spectator is forced to discard, or even actively annul, some of the numerous stimuli to which he is exposed simultaneously and successively. As noted by de Marinis, the spectator thus employs, automatically and unconsciously, two models – attentive focusing and selective attention – which prompts de Marinis' fundamental question: What draws the spectator's attention to one thing and away from another? We may begin with an example of attentive focusing and selective attention: the item of Daniel Parker's costume cited by more than half of the spectators was his flip-flops, which had attracted attention by Daniel putting them on and taking them off, carrying them around, etc. At the same time, the flip-flops diverted attention from other elements of his costume, such as his cap, mentioned by a single spectator although worn by Daniel throughout the performance. De Marinis' second idea is that the performance should begin by surprising the spectator, arousing his interest and wonder, if it is to secure his attention. This was borne out at several levels. To give two instances: the list of objects remembered by the spectators was headed by the unusual, surprising and therefore fascinating ones (e.g., the object with pins, the urinal, the lamppost, the animal); the same applies to the scenes which proved memorable, i.e., the scenes commanding attention by being shocking, funny, emotionally charged or enacted with exceptional persuasion.

Understanding and interpretation

By their own assessment, the interviewees had no difficulties understanding either the overall text or performance. Among the scenes experienced as less intelligible, more than half of the readers listed the end of

Scene 23, where two parallel conversations have to be followed simultaneously, while a few were perplexed by Dorothy's long monologues. As for the performance, the major snag turned out to be the fast pace of the action, which caused the spectators to overlook certain information, for example about Fred's childhood and Eva's past – that is, the parts with an epic dimension. After the readers had seen the performance and the spectators had read the text, both claimed to understand the overall play better and to find the unclear particulars clearer, which certainly suggests that the holistic understanding of a play requires both reading the text and seeing its performance – if possible, that is.

Neither readers nor spectators had trouble identifying the message of the play. True, some of the answers were very simple or even simplistic, but it was not the 'correctness' of the interpretation that was at issue here. Most readers approached the text from the perspective of one of the characters and his or her problems, thus perceiving the message in terms of the recognition that everyone has problems, regardless of their social status or education: the only difference is that some shut their eyes to trouble rather than admit it to themselves, presenting a perfect front while inwardly ravaged by conflicts. The spectators supplemented this perspective with the wider meaning of the play, its fundamental message, which points to the loneliness and alienation of the modern world. Although the text is semantically open, admitting various emphases of meaning, the answers of the selected sample mostly remained within the two semantic fields described above.

Evaluation and appreciation

Both text and performance rated very highly on the enjoyability scale (on a five-degree scale, the performance was awarded a grade of 4.67 and the play 3.97). The spectators praised particularly the cast, the comic portrayal of serious problems and the topical theme, that is, the reality of contemporary society. To these, the readers added the brilliant dialogues, composition and – in some cases – the use of varied language registers. The passages most often labelled as tedious were Dorothy's monologues at the beginning of the play, as well as some of the conversations between Dorothy and Eva. Furthermore, a theatre performance admits more types of comedy than one, and the comic quality accordingly ranked more highly with the spectators than with the readers (the performance was awarded 3.83, the text 2.87). While surprised by the frequent oaths and vulgarisms, the interviewees found them meaningful and effective in the context of the text/performance.

Comparison between the readers' textual worlds and the theatre realisation

The comparison between the drama text and its performance is based here on the similarities and differences between the text and its staging as perceived and interpreted by the recipients. What is assessed, then, is primarily the correspondence between the text and the verbal component of the performance, as well as between the textual worlds formed by the readers and by the authors of the performance. Except for a handful of line omissions or sentence additions, the performance strictly followed the text without interfering. However, the representations formed by the interviewees on the basis of reading often differed from the theatre realisation. The readers experienced the play as problem-oriented and serious, while the performance took a lighter and more comical perspective. Moreover, the settings were envisaged differently: the readers had imagined a prison with bars, while the scene on the stage was in fact minimalistic, with the rapidly shifting settings usually marked only with a representative object. The interviewees' answers suggested that the text paid more attention to Dorothy, whereas the performance focused on the eponymous protagonist. In fact, it was at the cast-of-characters level that the discrepancies between the readers' and artists' mental representations occurred most frequently. We compared in detail the envisioned character traits of Fred Miller and the costume of Daniel Parker.

It transpired that the image of the eponymous protagonist evoked by the text was surprisingly close to the one evoked by the production: among the semantic pairs provided on a five-degree scale, the following characteristics were marked by both groups: Fred is an intelligent, inhibited, lonely, emotionally complex, serious, vulnerable, professionally successful young man of neat appearance, non-violent and moderately attractive. Differences crop up, however, when it comes to his appearance. The spectators, associating the character's physical appearance with the actor's, saw Fred as short and fair-haired, while the readers saw him as tall and dark. This uniformity of reader-response is surprising, for the text gives no clue as to the characters' appearance. The second example involves a character's costume, concentrating on the character of psychiatrist Daniel Parker, the only one who wears an unchanging set of clothes throughout the performance. On the basis of reading, Daniel was envisaged as wearing elegant, expensive, refined clothing (examples of answers include: an impeccable suit of the latest fashion, formal trousers and a white shirt, an elegant dark-coloured suit with a loud tie, a stern, formal appearance, an expensive brand name suit, brand name shoes such as Hugo Boss, black

lacquered shoes, fashionable glasses, etc.). Again, the uniformity of the reply is striking: it was given by as many as 87 per cent of the interviewees, while only 13 per cent imagined Daniel wearing everyday clothes, that is, jeans or other casual trousers and a shirt or sweater, compounded by mismatched colours, tennis shoes and glasses. A different costume, however, was envisioned by the authors of the performance: the items most frequently listed by the spectators were flip-flops, an orange shirt and red trousers, while the most frequent adjectives to describe his clothing were motley, hippie, bright, mismatched, loose, casual, informal, simple, baggy.

Since the text gives no specific clue as to the characters' appearance, the strikingly uniform answers in these two cases presumably stem from a general socio-cultural knowledge, which generates in advance our mental representations of an exhibitionist-cum-stockbroker and a psychiatrist (the image of an urbane New York psychiatrist, for example, may result from the many similar characters featured in American TV series). At the same time, these answers suggest that the psyche of the characters in the text is clearly delineated, while their appearance remains a blank (Iser) or gap (Ubersfeld). In our case, the latter is filled in differently by the readers and by the theatre artists (with the spectators in their wake), but both options are legitimate and in no contradiction with the text. The recipients' emotional attitudes to a socially stigmatised character (the interviewees marked on a five-degree scale the values ranging from *odious* to *likeable*, from *my feelings about this character are negative* to *my feelings about this character are positive*) yielded high values, revealing a positive attitude on the recipient's part, the spectator's even more so than the reader's. Thus we may venture to repeat after Jauss, Iser, Brecht and others that an encounter with literature, that is, with an alien experience, helps to broaden the reader's/spectator's cognitive horizon, thus affecting both the reader/spectator and his views of the world.

Conclusion

Comparing our own mental representations, formed through reading a text, with the production's reading and the resulting realisation by the theatre artists is a major source of enjoyment. Reading the play after viewing the performance precludes this dimension because, to judge by the interviewees' answers, the reading conforms to what has been seen on the stage. Therefore it seems advisable to read a play before seeing it performed. Still, depending on the aim of the reading, the reverse sequence may make sense in some cases as well.

In our case the students reported finding the questionnaire useful: as a means of forming their impressions into shape, it enabled them to participate more easily and confidently in the classroom discussion; it alerted them to some of the previously neglected elements and to their functions; it helped them observe the autonomous yet interwoven relationship between text and performance, and introduced them to the mechanisms guiding the audience's reception as well as attribution of meaning. The greatest advantage of the questionnaire is its focus on one particular text/performance, which complements the drama theory lectures, that is, the classroom introduction to theoretical concepts: these tend to be sweeping, abstract summaries of various theories and methodological approaches, limited to isolated dramatic elements and illustrated with straightforward examples from diverse texts. This type of questionnaire and the accompanying discussion refines the strategies specific to reading drama texts, as well as introduces the theoretical apparatus of drama analysis. Such questionnaires encourage the verbalisation of individual aesthetic experience: the individual mentally re-enacts and considers the performance or text, making notes which will assist him in comparing his own conclusions and observations with others'. To be sure, drama analysis with the aid of a questionnaire is no novelty: various questionnaires have been developed by Anne Ubersfeld, André Helbo and Patrice Pavis, but those are general rather than focused on a single play, and more attentive to analysing the performance itself.⁷

Our case study provides no final answers, but it does allow an insight into the reading and understanding processes of a larger group of readers, revealing what the readers notice on spontaneously reading a text or attending a theatre performance for the first time; what they experience during the reading; from what perspective they approach the text; how they integrate the text information into their existing mental schemes, etc. The results show the diversity of the textual worlds based on reading the same text, proving that the reading and understanding of literary texts depends not only on the reader's level of education and literary knowledge, but also on his or her subjective qualities. The interviewees' answers thus reveal their individual, subjective value standards, which result in heterogeneous answers to open-ended questions. Even when several interviewees give a similar answer, notice the same element, or describe the same scene, their interpretations may differ because they spring from a subjective experience, from piecing the theatre signs together into an idiosyncratic whole.

That is why such case studies at the same time test the viability of the methodology itself. Studying various kinds of audience with the aid of questionnaires ranks among the most widespread forms, but its key prob-

lem is ensuring the right proportion between qualitative and quantitative question types. The qualitative types, to be answered in the interviewees' own words, elicit heterogeneous answers, which are difficult to categorise and evaluate yet clearly indicate a spontaneous response. The answers to closed-type questions, on the other hand, are suggested in advance and thus easier to count and process statistically, but they entail the loss of certain aspects of information. Individual researchers seek a balance between the two possibilities, depending on the subject and goals of their research. Moreover, a crucial problem is the research methodology itself: it is difficult to explore reading without interfering, through our research methods and instruments, with the readers' spontaneous reading processes – without suggesting by our questions how the text should be understood, or drawing attention to a certain element, or guiding them in some other way. All these drawbacks result in the scarcity of such studies in Slovenia.

NOTES

¹ The list of such hypothetical readers is comprehensive, with each researcher having designed his or her own model; see Andrew Bennett's introduction to the essay collection *Readers & Reading* (Bennett 3).

² o be sure, drama texts have not been completely excluded: N. Holland, for example, examines how Brecht transforms fantasies into socially accepted meanings, W. Iser attempts to explain the types of laughter and its function in Beckett, and H. R. Jauss explains the Iphigenia myth as used by Racine and Goethe; the reader's/spectator's viewpoint is also the perspective of Jauss' *Über den Grund des Vergnügens am komischen Helden*, which seeks to explain the tragic and the comic as relative, depending on the audience and their subjective perceptions.

³ The applicability of the above terms to concrete analyses has been proved by a number of studies. Marvin Carlson's chapter on 'Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance', published in his book *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (1990), starts from the theoretical premises of W. Iser, H. R. Jauss, U. Eco, M. de Marinis and S. Fish, applying them to four examples. Having assessed the influence of genre on understanding various drama types throughout history, Carlson moves on to the role and development of the theatre booklet, particularly to the way in which the information provided guides the audience's reception. On the example of a specific play, *Waiting for Godot*, Carlson addresses the impact of advertising, demonstrating how an ad may either anticipate or miss the model spectator. The last example illustrates the influence exerted by newspaper reviews, in this case by the review of a *Cherry Orchard* performance. Based on these examples, Carlson observes that theatre studies mainly deal with the audience's reactions and feelings after the performance, while paying too little attention to the factors shaping their horizons of expectations, that is, to what the audience itself brings to the theatre: expectations, assumptions, strategies and anything else that will creatively cooperate with the stimuli of the performance.

⁴ Similar conclusions are drawn in Una Chaudhuri's article 'The Spectator in Drama/Drama in the Spectator' (1984), which makes an additional temporal distinction between the three recipients, first setting them in the time of the play's creation, and then distinguishing further between all subsequent readings.

⁵ *Ekshibicionist* is the story of Fred Miller, a successful stockbroker who shows his emotions in a socially unacceptable way. This is the third time that exhibitionism has landed him in jail, where he meets Dorothy Jackson, a social worker who sees him not as a mere sexual pervert but as a vulnerable and mistrustful young man, and they gradually develop an emotional tie. Her opposite is the psychiatrist Eva Stempowsky: she considers Miller a patient and a scum, who can only be healed through shock therapy. In a total of three acts and twenty-four scenes, the play, set in New York, presents five characters (the above three plus Jimmy, a prison guard, and another psychiatrist, Daniel) and their intimate destinies, with each of them going through a new episode although, generally speaking, nothing happens. It is thus a story unfolding mainly at the level of language, a story based on familiarity with contemporary discourse and the modern rituals of communication, which serve Jovanović as a foil for the modern man's central problems: loneliness, fragility, vulnerability, relation between professional success and private hollowness, search of a socially acceptable self-image, etc.

⁶ The research results, accompanied by the full scholarly apparatus (statistical data processing, tables, charts, appendixes including the interviewees' responses), have been published in my monograph *Najdeni pomeni: empirične raziskave recepcije literarnega dela* (Found Meanings: Empirical Research into the Reception of a Work of Literature), while the present article only summarises the key findings.

⁷ The best known must be the Pavis questionnaire, practised by its author with his students and directed at a semiological analysis of the performance. Most often cited, the Pavis questionnaire has been included in a number of books; its Slovene translation is found in Pavis' *Gledališki slovar* (Dictionary of the Theatre) (1997) or the *Maska* (Mask) magazine (1988–1989).

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