



Arab Republic of Egypt
Ain Shams University
Faculty of Education
English Dept.

Theatre Audience As Critic: A Study of Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth

An M.A. Thesis in English Literature

Submitted by:
Iman Magdy Talaat Ibrahim

Supervised by:

Prof. Fathi Abdallah Mohammad Darrag
Professor of English Literature
English Dept.
Faculty of Education
Ain Shams University

Dr. Faten Mohammad El-Masry
Lecturer of English Literature
English Dept.
Faculty of Education
Ain Shams University

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Preface

Contemporary literary theory and criticism offer an atmosphere where the study of theatre audience as a critic is a typically motivating research project. Recent critical theory, notably reader-response criticism, has the role of the reader in the interpretation of the text and the dynamic reader- text relationship as its pivotal concepts. This critical climate affects the criteria according to which literary experiences are assessed. The productivity of reception becomes a main concern.

This theoretical approach affects actual theatrical practice as theatre audience is conceived as a co-creator with the author rather than a passive receptor of the performance. Successful theatrical experiences are those which achieve interactive performance-audience relationships. Hence, this research seeks to explore the roles charged on both the audience and the performance in order to achieve the required communicative interactive relationships.

The thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter discusses the process of theatre-audience communication. The factors that affect the audience's mode of reception are analytically studied. Those factors can be categorized as factors that relate to the audience's social and personal characteristics and others relate to the theatre. The former set of factors has to do with the audience's ideology, social class, material level, education, age, sex, and taste. The latter has to do with the stimuli that theatre offers to the audience. The performance starts to stimulate its potential audience through the information it offers about itself through marketing activities. When actually at theatre, a set of preperformance factors works on the audience (theatre building, interior design, theatre program, auditorium music and light). When the

performance begins, two sets of factors start to work i.e., non-performance factors (stage-auditorium spatial relationship, composition and size of the audience's crowd) and performance factors (dramatic action, stage vision, sound, actors-audience relationship). The audience's reactions to those stimuli whether during the performance or after it are studied.

The second chapter discusses the theatrical experience of the Elizabethan/Jacobean Shakespeare's audience who watched Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth at The Globe. The socio-cultural characteristics of that audience are studied with reference to the whole ideological pattern of the age and the status of theatre within it. Then, general theatrical conventions of the day are explored. In the light of those conventions, Shakespeare's stage directions, and commentary on Shakespeare's plays in performance; The Globe productions of the three plays in question are analyzed in terms of the stimuli they offered the audience and the audience's responses they elicited.

The third chapter discusses the twentieth century worldwide theatregoing in relation to the socio-cultural characteristics of the audience. Moving to Shakespeare, the twentieth century artistic attitudes towards Shakespearean production are surveyed. Models of remarkable worldwide performances of Hamlet, King Lear, and Macbeth throughout the century are critically analyzed. The aim is to trace how the twentieth century cultural ambiance and artistic trends influenced Shakespearean performances and the ways they communicated with their audience.

The conclusion of the study is a synthesis of the main findings related to the role of the audience as active participants in the theatrical experience with special reference to Shakespearean productions.

Chapter One:

The Process of Theatre - Audience Communication

“It is self-evident that a play must communicate or it is not a play at all”, J.L.Styan confirms (*Drama, Stage, and Audience* 1). The very word “communicate” means that theatre can never be a unilateral activity. There must be a message that is transmitted from a sender to a receptor through a channel. However, theatrical communication is rather complicated. A theatrical performance sends messages to the audience, but there are many other elements that interfere in the process of communication. Those elements form a catalyst for the process of communication, and thereby they affect the meanings of the sent messages. Styan offers an illustrative model for the process of theatrical communication:

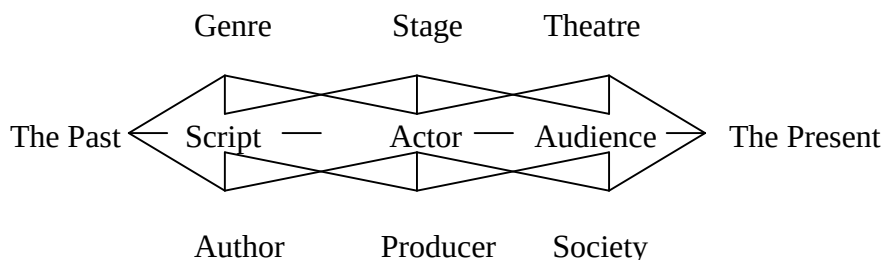


Fig.1. Theatrical Communication Network. Styan , J.L.*Drama, Stage, and Audience*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 14.

The illustration suggests that the theatrical message is contained in a written signaling system; the script that is carried to the actor who transforms it into an acted signaling system; the performance that is offered live to the audience. A network of relevant factors exists beyond each of the three elements. Beyond the script exist the author’s

conditions of working, career, status in society, and attitude towards genre conventions. Beyond the actor exist the director and the technical conventions of staging. Beyond the audience exist its personal attitudes towards theatre and the whole society's general presumptions about theatre.

The past and the present encompass the whole process of theatrical communication. The historical moment when a play is performed significantly influences the course of communication. This influence mainly pivots around the status of theatre within the socio – political context and the consequent role accorded to it during that very moment. Socio-political authorities can control the role of theatre by imposing a set of religious, moral, or political restrictions. Such restrictions can be imposed both directly through official censorship and indirectly through financial subsidies, which guarantee a certain level of dependence on the state.

Amid this network of personal, artistic, and social elements, the audience's role as a receptor can never be dealt with as constant. The audience's mode of reception and consequently its mode of response-making dynamically relate to the other elements in the network. The audience's mode of reception is influenced by factors that begin to work before the beginning of the actual performance. The audience's social and personal characteristics are significantly relevant. Manfred Naumann confirms the effects of those characteristics on the audience's mode of reception and describes them as "the before of reception" that is determined by the audience member's "worldview and ideology, by his membership of a class, stratum or group, by his material situation (income, leisure, living and work conditions), by his education,

knowledge and level of culture, by his age, by his sex, by his aesthetic needs, and by his attitude to the very literature that he has already given a reception to” (qtd.in Bennet, *Theatre Audiences* 57). Individual differences among audience members in the sense of their social and personal characteristics act as a background according to which each audience member receives and responds to the performance. Therefore, each audience member passes through a theatrical experience distinct from those of his neighbours.

The audience member’s ideology directs his reception of the performance. It determines the socio-political perspective through which he approaches the performance. The perspective one takes puts certain aspects of the performance in focus and others in shadow. Therefore, some significant aspects of the performance may be ignored and other aspects that may be seen less significant by the performance makers may be focused on. Moreover, ideological bias can get the audience member to understand and interpret the performance signals in a way contradictory to that meant by the performance makers.

The audience member’s membership of a class and material situation are interdependent factors. Classes are sociologically defined as “strata that are based primarily on economic criteria such as occupation, income, and wealth”(Kornblum127). There is a constant relationship between an individual’s material level and his involvement in theatrical experiences because a higher income facilitates greater participation in leisure pursuits, notably theatre. However, the mode of reception of the high-incomed audience can be a corrupted one. The high-incomed audience goes to theatre with an attitude that it pays its money to be amused. Therefore, it does not assume any interactive role on its part. Its mind and

heart are less receptive than the low-incomed audience who hardly pays for the performance and eagerly experiences it. High ticket prices increase theatregoing of the rather passive high-incomed audience at the expense of the more receptive low-incomed audience. According to Allardyce Nicoll, that produces what might be called show business (29).

Membership of a certain group is significantly effective in the process of theatre - audience communication. Robert Escapist explains, "Each group has its community assumptions; a certain number of ideas, beliefs, value judgments or real judgments which are accepted as evident and have no need of either justification, demonstration, or apology"(77). When the performance really addresses the concerns and desires of the community that makes up the audience, the experience becomes much more powerful. Ethnic or racial groups are typical examples. These groups, in the face of social discrimination, always organize themselves in a way that supports the ideas of ethnic or social nationalism and reinforces the sense of belongingness and peoplehood shared by their members. For these groups and for other marginalized social groups, theatrical reception of performances addressing their interests is an act of self-assertion through which they demonstrate that they have a cultural pattern of their own and have cultural media of expressing it.

In addition to the social class or group to which the audience member belongs, the degree of urbanity of his social milieu affects his mode of reception in the sense that it affects his idea of the theatrical event and attitude towards it. The audience's idea of theatrical events varies according to its familiarity with theatre. In urban areas where a wide range of cultural products in general and theatrical ones in particular is available, the audience is likely to show less interest in theatrical events.

Inattentively it goes to theatre as a usual aspect of its metropolitan experience. For the audience outside larger urban centers where there is a limited access to theatre, a theatrical performance is an impressive event. Therefore, this audience employs all its receptive tools in order to grasp the experience as much as it can.

The audience's educational pattern, whether state controlled or not, contributes to determining its mode of reception. Sociologically, education is defined as "the process by which a society transmits knowledge, values, or ideologies to its members"(Kornblum 506). State controlled education reinforces a certain set of values that goes in conformity with the main objectives of the state. Therefore, it creates an audience that is trained to receive and accept a certain cultural pattern and tend to refuse or disapprove what diverges from it.

The audience's level of education and the consequent ranges of general knowledge and that of theatrical specialized knowledge - if exists - determine the extent to which it understands the ideas included in the performance. Audience members who receive theatrical education are supposed to know a great deal about theatre. They are able to criticize performances according to literary academic norms.

Age is an influencing element in the sense that the emotional and the mental features determined by age affect the audience's mode of reception. Joseph Shipley, on the basis of age, classifies theatre audience's modes of reception into three categories: the child's, the adolescent's, and the adult's (267). The child's mode of reception can be characterized by tendency of categorizing people as black or white. What satisfies a child is to watch the villains punished and the good enjoying happy endings. The adolescent's mode of reception can be rather

romantic; he/she tends to make the world better. Adolescents wish to see happy endings, but they are mature enough to realize that they are often false. The adult's mode of reception is not based on moral judgements and not controlled by romantic slogans. It is rather rational.

The audience member's sex determines many aspects of the receptional process. On the perceptual level, an individual's gender partially determines what is perceived in any given situation due to the presence of male or female hormones. These hormones are carried in the blood, which supplies all sensory receptors. Therefore, certain sex-based perceptual differences can be observed. Stanley Coren notes that women show superior hearing sensitivity especially at higher frequencies, whereas men have faster reaction times to visual stimuli (627-8).

There is a commonplace belief that women, unlike men, tend to make emotional judgements rather than rational ones. Socio-psychological researches disprove that belief. Researches explain that gender based differences on the emotional level are due to women's higher receptive sensibility. Leslie R.B. Rode & Judith A. Hall conclude that "females are superior to males both at recognition of feelings in others and at verbally and facially expressing a wide variety of feelings themselves" (Lewis & Haviland 447). Therefore, women are expected to grasp the emotional addresses in the performance more comprehensively and to react to them more powerfully than men do.

On the ideological level, men and women are supposed to show opposed modes of ideological interpretations of theatre performances because theatre is one of the products of the predominant male-based culture. This cultural pattern tends to portray women as subordinate to men and as objects for sexual pleasure (Kornblum 337). Therefore, on

the one hand, men are expected to interpret theatre messages according to an ideological framework that asserts that male universal reality. On the other hand, as an act of self-assertion, women are expected to interpret theatre messages against the ideology of the performance that underestimates them.

Aesthetic needs have to do with the motivations that the audience has to attend performances. These needs vary, and consequently the modes of the audience's reception vary. Some audience members want merely to be entertained and to forget their personal cares and problems. They consider theatre a form of escape. Others wish theatre to provide them with new insights and perceptions about significant issues whether political or social. Each type of audience supports a kind of performances totally different from that the other supports.

The last "before of reception" factor has to do with the previous literary / theatrical experience of the audience. Previous literary experience interferes with the reception of a new one. Hans R. Jauss explains, " Even at that instant it first appears, a literary work does not surface as a complete novelty flowering forth in an informational desert, its public is predisposed to a certain mode of reception. The new text evokes for the reader or listener the expectation horizon and the rules of the game with which preceding texts have made him familiar". (qtd.in Pavis 74)

Creative pieces of literature must involve the audience in new aesthetic experiences through defying its horizon of expectations. Jauss proposes that the larger the distance between what is familiar for and expected by the audience and what it actually experiences is, the more aesthetic and active the receptive process is (Pavis 75).

Defying the audience's expectations increases its attention to the performance in general and to the deviating elements in particular. This keeps the audience's receptive tools always active. However, there is a problem with productions of well-known dramatic texts. The audience's horizon of expectation involves not only a set of familiar artistic conventions but also a previous knowledge of at least the main lines of the drama. Shakespearean productions are typical examples where challenging the audience's assumptions is a difficult necessary task.

Another factor that begins to work before the beginning of the performance is the audience's attitude towards it. The audience's attitude towards a particular performance comes into existence at the moment of knowing about it through marketing media. Marketing a performance refers to the activities that encourage the potential audience members' support and attendance. Newspaper advertisements, radio and television interviews, web site pages, promotional booths, street banners, word of mouth, and professional critics' reviews are some of the possible marketing activities. Marketing activities should provide the essential information about the performance they advertise i.e., the theatre company, the performance title, the playwright's name, the members of the acting staff, the director's name, the ticket price, and the time and the place of the performance. Each of those pieces of information contributes to the audience's attitude towards the performance.

Each theatre company identifies itself and its mission in its social community. That creates the audience's attitude towards the performances it presents. Whether that attitude is for or against the performances deeply affects the audience's mode of reception.

The performance title and the playwright's name can attract the audience. If the title is for one of the well-known plays and the playwright is one of the great dramatic figures, the audience expects to get the ultimate theatrical pleasure. Furthermore, the title contains advance information of a thematic nature. It can repulse the potential audience or guarantee its support. Susan Bennett exemplifies, "The title No Sex Please, We Are British is the only reason for that play's remarkable box office success" (Theatre Audiences 148).

Bits of information that the audience knows about the director and the actors, as Bennett indicates, establish a distinctive attitude towards the nature of the performance (Theatre Audiences 148). The audience can expect what ideology or ideologies the performance supports according to its knowledge of the staff's social and political positions. It can expect what artistic conventions are adopted in the light of the staff's careers.

The ticket price has an essential role. Exchanging money for the ticket promises pleasure. A high priced ticket seems to promise extreme excellence and ultimate enjoyment, whereas the under-priced performance may be perceived as artistically inferior. Sometimes free performances are appealing in the sense of being unusual opportunities that the audience competes to win.

The performance time can tell the audience something about its nature. Bennett suggests that a traditional evening performance is expected to be a mainstream performance, whereas a daytime and work / leisure split performance is expected to be rather experimental (Theatre Audiences 128).

The location of the theatre together with its social milieu highly influences the audience's attitude towards the theatrical occasion. The

audience who attends theatres in central urban areas expects an elite cultural product and a consequent excellent theatrical experience. For example, a theatre district such as Broadway obviously carries its own attraction because it is a district where theatre constitutes an important aspect of the established socio-cultural activity.

The theatre building also contributes to the audience's attitude towards the performance. A building can represent an institution of high culture. Buildings of classic architectural styles and those of historic importance are typical examples. Oscar Brockett suggests that those theatre buildings tend to discourage all except a cultural elite that expects classic performances, whereas "found spaces" that are not designed exclusively as theatres such as parks, streets, and coffeehouses attract "theatrically unsophisticated spectators"(280). Whether the audience expects to watch a classic elite performance or a nontraditional popular one influences the way it decodes the performance.

Those bits of information that marketing media provide are influential in the sense that the audience tends to receive the performance in conformity with them. If a play is publicized as a serious drama, comic elements are devalued in the receptive process. If a play is publicized as a comic one, tragic incidents are followed with a distance enough to guarantee a comic experience. Furthermore, the audience wants the satisfaction it is promised. Therefore, it tends to be less tolerant towards the occurrence of any unavoidable mistake such as a replacement of a leading performer or a sudden failure of stage machinery.

Arriving at the theatre, the audience begins to go through the actual theatrical experience. Chronologically, the first influencing element is the

interior design of the theatre. Each audience member as a human being responds to his/her physical environment. The design of public spaces in the theatre (foyers, lobbies, lounges, rest rooms, and corridors) has a double effect on the audience's experience. Functionally, if those places are pleasant and commodious, the audience is more likely to enjoy the entire theatergoing experience. Socially, these spaces are supposed to satisfy the audience's desire "to see and be seen" (Smiley 350). Lobbies and foyers, other than the other public spaces, can do this primary social function. Their design should allow the audience members to observe the characteristics of one another. This is a main aspect of any theatregoing experience.

In order to achieve this essential function, public areas are supposed to have sizes and shapes suitable for the number expected in the auditorium and for the type of circulation that may occur. However, there is a psychological point to be made in favor of small rest rooms, narrow aisles, and limited lobby spaces. Stephen Langley suggests that they can produce the "crowding effect" i.e., "crowding people in order to create emotional and intellectual togetherness"(69). This togetherness creates a sense of excitement and anticipation.

The next influencing element is the performance program. It is the first means of contact between the performance and the audience. Some programs simply provide information about the play's title, dates of production, and crew names. Other programs are more elaborate. They provide the history of the play or of the theatre company, photographs of the actors or the performance, biographies of the personnel involved, and / or a director's note which may be intended to promote a particular interpretation.