CHAPTER EIGHT

PERFORMING TEXTS

Performing a text is rendering it for an audience. Players either hold the text and read from it or memorize it. Either way, they "stick to the script." In contrast to improvising, performing texts emphasizes fidelity to an author's material. Players rehearse.

Including performing among the language practices amounts to laying a second reading curriculum over the first—and a rigorous one at that—because performing entails both silent reading and reading aloud, close textual analysis, and discussion of meaning and technique. It both deepens and displays reading comprehension. Like small-group discussion, informal classroom drama, and other oral activities, it deserves a solid and continual role in the language arts program at all ages. This means we are concerned not just with one or two big productions but with many small performances all the time.

Strictly speaking, of course, a script is material that is written specifically to be performed. In other words, a script is a planned oral presentation, written first and spoken later. It is a blueprint for others to follow. But since any reading matter can be presented orally, any text can be considered a script. If it has a character voice or voices, as in a story, poem, or series of letters, it can be the script for a dramatic performance, even though it was not originally written for that purpose. Considering script then broadly, a large proportion of what students read, including each other's writing, is available for performance.

In addition to scripts written expressly for performance and other texts that can be treated as such, there is a third source of material for classroom performance—transcripts. Transcripts represent unplanned speech, spontaneous colloquy among different minds, spoken first and written down afterward—shaped not by some artful intention but by some communication need or public event. Because a transcript of such a colloquy is not as complete as the event itself, it begs for re-creation.

A couple of activities from other chapters lead well into performing. One is for an individual to rehearse a selection with the help of coaching from the teacher, then to read it to a small group of the class (page 156). Another is to dramatize a story by borrowing the main events and improvising the details of dialogue and action (page 104). Young children tend to find the latter's mixture of fidelity and invention a more natural way to enact a story they have read than sticking to a script. Even when they perform a text they tend to ad-lib some of it. The more developed they become as actors, however, the more they understand the great

amount of leeway any script must allow anyway for creative interpretation and technique even when one sticks to it. The improvisational activities of *INFORMAL CLASSROOM DRAMA* provide excellent background for the vocal expression of rehearsed reading, and the body-English activities stand players in good stead indeed when staging the full action of a script.

A general continuity might take a student through these activities:

- reading to a group after getting coached
- reading in unison
- working up a reading with a partner for taping or live audience
- participating in choral reading having voice parts
- staging reading in one of the special techniques described later in this chapter
- memorizing and performing a play

TEACHER ROLE

Your role in helping students perform texts is not to direct the productions but rather to feed into the rehearsing groups pertinent alternatives as to how to proceed. This parallels your role in improvisational drama and in writing workshops. Try to encourage independence by giving the students responsibility for carrying through their own selection of text, rehearsals, and final production.

■ COACHING

During rehearsal you can suggest variables they can experiment with, such as:

- variations in volume, pitch, rate, and tone of voice to convey various qualities of emotion
- the use of solo versus chorus for a voice part
- the division of the lines among actors in unscripted text
- the use of pantomime and physical action
- pauses in the flow of words to allow action to happen or to provide emphasis for words or actions
- physical placement and stance of actors and position of objects on stage
- onstage versus audience or offstage eye focus
- the use of actual physical objects versus people playing the parts of objects
- the use of representative "props" or a portion of a costume
- the use of chants, songs, light, dance, music, media
- the casting of roles among players

Rotating roles or playing at half or double speed will help students discover potentials they may not otherwise be aware of. Sometimes you can help recharge a scene by introducing a "What if... ?" question, such as "What if you were facing another direction when you said that?" If the reading seems "canned" or dull, improvising a scene in the players' own words can engender spontaneity in the next reading of the script.

The practical importance of a performer making himself heard clearly and of projecting gives you a good opportunity to encourage distinct and forceful articu-

lation of speech sounds. Omitting or weakening final consonants is a common trait of American speech. Point this out sometimes when you hear it, and demonstrate occasionally how to articulate vowels fully. Although it's not advisable to turn rehearsals into elocution lessons, still they are a natural occasion to practice "speech" in that sense. Sheer involvement in the emotions of a role will energize and clarify the voice. Pointers from you will also help; so will working with scripts that call for various dialects and listening to recordings by professional actors, to serve as models of effective, euphonious articulation.

Act as a mirror to players to reflect to them what they sound and look like in rehearsal, the pace and pitch of their scene, and the mood or character relationship that comes across to you. That helps them to know if they're expressing what they intend. Set an example of mirroring and suggest that one of a cast do it for others rehearsing.

■ ARRANGING FOR AN AUDIENCE

As with much other small-group work, a workshop situation prevails in which members not performing at the moment react to those who are. If a script contains several scenes with different actors, those offstage feed back to those onstage. If the script contains only one scene with only three roles, the group might include six people so that two casts can alternate performing and responding. They might present both versions to the same audience, who can compare them in discussion afterwards. Or they might discuss versions themselves and decide to meld the two into one, or present both to different audiences, or tape one version and perform the other live.

Members work out their own and each other's problems together. Each member gets an inside-outside view of both his work and the work of others. While learning the art, he also becomes a sensitive, informed responder. All members are participants; there are no detached outsiders. For this reason a workshop provides a comfortable transition to acting before an audience.

As students request opportunities to perform for a larger audience, you need to schedule whole-class sharing or sessions for other audiences. As students become accustomed to small-group process and to looking on other students as the recipients of their productions—not only for performances but for writing, research, improvisations, media presentations, and other productions—a relatively large proportion of time will be spent in sharing. Part of your job is to balance the needs of the readers or actors with those of the audience. Keep in mind that witnessing each other's productions gets everybody interested in similar adult productions and gives them ideas for their own creations.

Workshop process can be built into the activity directions for the performing practices to be described next. Each practice can be set forth on activity cards for self-directed work. However, you may want to lead an activity once or twice to introduce it to some students before relegating it to a card.

REHEARSED READING

Reading aloud is the base from which performing a text is a natural extension. Working up a reading with one to three partners prepares well for bigger script

rehearsals. A small group can render a text by simply reading in unison or by reading aloud one at a time. The goal may or may not be presentation to an audience. As a development of partner reading, playing with the text may itself be enough of an incentive. Or the group may rehearse until they perfect a version to record.

Activity directions can make clear that players experiment with different voice volume, pitch, rate, pause, and tone. Encourage creative tinkering. For example, students can try out a tiny, soft voice, then a loud, bold; high, shrill; shaky, scared; stumbling, unsure; clowning, funny; or sad, sobbing voice. They can take turns reading in imagined situations such as at the bottom of an abandoned mine shaft or on a mountaintop where the voice echoes; they can try reading as if they were laughing, hiccupping, cuddling a sleepy baby, or standing on a lonely highway in the rain. They can assume roles that demand varying voices and read the passage again as it would be spoken by a king, a slave, a holy monk, a tough street-gang leader, or a lively entertainer. After the various readings the players can talk about how the meaning of the words themselves change with each reading.

Practice for rehearsed readings can include emphasizing different words in a sentence to illustrate how stress communicates meaning,

- *I* like that painting.
  (*You may not, but I do.*)
- I *like* that painting.
  (*It really pleases me.*)
- I like *that* painting.
  (*I am not crazy about the others.*)
- I like that *painting.*
  (*It's the thing I like among all the other kinds of objects.*)

If you lead the whole class in some practice like this while doing choral reading, then small groups working without you can exploit the idea as part of working up any reading. Help them think of other contrastive ways of delivering the same words.

The general procedure for rehearsed reading is to sift and discuss some reading selections, talk some about the main point and approach of the text chosen, try reading parts to get a sense of who should take certain voices and how the piece should be generally treated, then cast and rehearse. Typically, this process interweaves silent reading (as members study the text a bit to size it up), trial oral readings (as they sound the text to listen for ideas about meaning and the best rendering), consulting the dictionary and other people for pronunciation and definition and other information, discussion of author's intention and characterization and so on (as they work out the content to be expressed), and textual analysis (as they dig for helpful particulars).

A student working alone may be directed to try out, and preferably record, several versions of a poem or other text. Then he can ask you and certain other students to listen to his versions and say how they differ and which is preferred for which reasons. Finally, the student can record or perform his synthesis of different versions. If a selection has several obvious or potential voice roles, this provides special challenge to the solo reader. If a small group chooses such a selection, however, it's better for neither you nor they to prejudge the number of voice parts when deciding how many members the group will contain. Let stu-

dents discuss how many "voices," in one sense or another, a text that is not a script contains.

This is an extremely valuable learning that you don't want to short-circuit. If the group decides that a poem, say, would best be divided into three voice parts but the group contains four people, two can either double on one of the parts, often an interesting decision in itself, or one member can critique rehearsals. If short a person, the group can look for another member or decide to let one of them read more than one voice part. Help students get away from the idea of merely a one-to-one correspondence between members and roles so that they can take advantage of the many techniques described below.

A whole class may decide to combine their small-group efforts into a concert of readings that deal with a particular theme or event, interspersing individual and group readings.

■ CHANTS AND SONGS

Chanting in unison with others is a very pleasant way to perform a rhythmical text. Young children especially delight in chanting together nursery rhymes, jump-rope jingles, and rhythmical games. See page 266. As rhythmical texts are chanted, the children can keep the beat by clapping, snapping their fingers, stamping, or using simple rhythmical instruments. A "conductor" can speed or slow pace and vary other dynamics.

Melody may be added to chanting. Community singing is fun, and its value for language development should not be overlooked. For poor readers, it provides another stimulus to sight-reading. For all students, it builds confidence in expression. Follow the directions for choral reading given on page 184. A small group can listen to a recording, learn the lyrics, perform the song for others, and then also teach the song to others. Some students may opt to accompany their songs with instrumental music. An interesting variation is "sing-say," a kind of delivery that emphasizes meaning but retains some of the melody. Encourage practice of this half-speaking, half-singing, for it produces interesting results and can help normal voicing become more euphonious.

■ PANTOMIME

One of the simplest procedures for young or inexperienced students is to read aloud while other members of the group pantomime the action. A poem such as Mary Britton Miller's "Cat" is useful for this type of performing: in delicious detail a black cat yawns, stretches, stands up, licks, arches, and pads away.

When students are pantomiming a story, have them "be" each new character that is introduced. Everybody plays all roles, including those of objects, if they choose. This is a good way to "celebrate" a student story also. As he reads it, his classmates pantomime the action.

For more mature students suggest sometimes that they slow the pantomime for greater clarity and that the reader adjust his pace to match. Instead of strictly pantomiming the action, players can express the mood of it with whole-body motions that are slow or fast, smooth or staccato, tiny or large, carefree or deliberate, delicate or powerful, and so on. At this point they have moved the motion close to dance, of course.

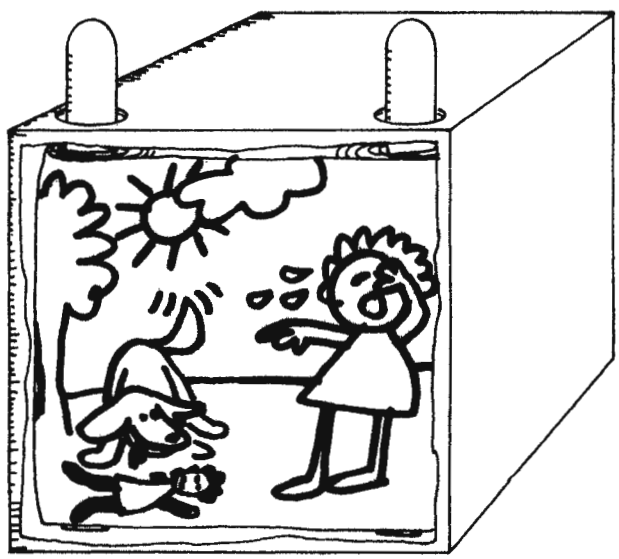
■ OTHER ACCOMPANIMENTS

Dance and music are effective accompaniments to the rehearsed reading of poems or other mood pieces. Images may be projected using slides, movie films, or overhead transparencies. Performers may decide to put a set of illustrations for a story or poem onto a long strip of paper and roll it around two broomsticks that have been inserted into holes near the open end of a cardboard box. The pictures can then be rolled in front of the audience as the story is read (see Figure 8.1). Drawings or paintings of characters and scenery can be backed with pieces of felt or flannel material and placed onto a board covered with felt to illustrate the various scenes of a story as another person reads it. At other times the best accompaniment may simply be swatches of colored material or projected colored light to reinforce the mood.

Every effort should be made to awaken students to the potential of synesthesia—the interpretation of one sense by another. This transmodal perception gives words a new power to evoke images and become symbols for wider experience. Without this perception, reading will remain for many children an experience isolated from all else they know. Rehearsed reading with multimedia accompaniments helps students extend the words back to the sensory experience the author is writing about. The power of the voice to evoke should remain central, but synesthesia can link this power to the power of other arts for a fuller experience.

Building on their experience with completely improvised puppet shows, students can move into scripted ones. One can read a script or narrative while the others perform the actions of the characters through manipulating puppets. This activity provides another opportunity for skillful interpretative oral reading. Both original scripts and adaptations from other narratives can be produced by students for puppet shows. More mature students may find putting on puppet shows for younger ones a face-saving way to continue a mode of presentation they may otherwise consider too "babyish." See page 96 for more on puppets.

FIGURE 8.1 ROLL-THROUGH STORY BOX



■ FOR RECORDING

Any rehearsed reading or singing can be put onto audio- or videotape and played later for an audience. This method avoids the problem of having the audience's presence inhibit the performance, and it has the added value of allowing the performers to listen to and assess the quality of their rendering, redoing it if they're not satisfied. As they listen and discuss changes between tapings they become sensitized to various voicing of text. Producing a tape provides a powerful stimulus to read. And the tapes become part of the classroom library for other students to listen to themselves or to use with the text for read-along.

Recording a story, poem, or song might be the final stage in a progression that begins when a student:

1. listens to a selection that is read to him by someone or played on a tape and follows the text with his eyes
2. reads it back and forth with a partner, practicing variant readings
3. reads it silently alone
4. reads it to a less-developed reader
5. works it up as a reading to be taped and placed in the classroom library

An audio recording can be presented as a radio script, which relies entirely on voice and other sound. Much of the art of radio's golden era consisted of conveying everything without vision. Sound effects and narration play an important part, but the expressiveness of the voice must reign supreme. Scripting for radio requires special, skillful compensation for the lack of video. So as students work up readings, they may think about whether they will present them with or without visual presence. One way suits radio and audio-recording, the other TV and live performance. Encourage students to gear their rehearsals to the medium they have chosen—or to choose the medium according to how rehearsals have gone!

If students are doing a radio script, they will have to focus on what the microphone picks up and not rely on gestures and actions that cannot be heard. Peers who are critiquing a rehearsal may do well to turn their backs on the performers in order to better focus on the auditory experience. Casting is best done with eyes closed. The performer frequently hears his own voice better if he talks to a wall and cups his hands behind his ears. The group may appoint a director who is responsible for the overall aural effect and timing. Pace is crucial, because without visual clues understanding is often dependent on slowing down certain moments. Students will pick up techniques from listening to recordings of real radio shows.[1]

A TV performance, on the other hand, is played for both what the microphone picks up and what the camera sees. There are many more middle and close-up shots than long shots, so the actors' faces and voices are emphasized. It's an intimate medium. Broad gestures appropriate for theater seem overplayed on a TV screen. A camera can go many places and play many visual games. Anthologies of radio and TV scripts are highly desirable classroom materials.

---

[1] Tapes of old radio shows are available at most public libraries and many bookstores or can be ordered through Brentano's Bookstore. Call 1-800-833-BOOKS.

■ CHORAL READING

Sometimes called "voice chorus," choral reading can be a very pleasurable and effective way for students to practice reading texts aloud. Often a large-group activity, it is social but unthreatening. It serves well to boost skill and confidence to the point of more individual performance. Besides strengthening students' literacy, choral reading helps to develop their feeling for the artful flow of words, the intonations of voice, and the rhythms of language. Supported, and sometimes corrected, by the voices of the group, each individual can hide in the herd and let himself go.

Better readers can carry along the less able ones, though it is also true that the latter can mumble uncertainly through, and that's why individual coaching should supplement the choral reading for these students. Nevertheless, shaky readers can be bold, make guesses when they are not sure, and suffer little risk of failure. They can hear from the better readers whether their guesses are right or not. Often, however, choral members learn texts by heart anyway.

For choral reading, a common reading text is useful, but this can be written on newsprint or blackboard, or projected overhead. If the texts are written large and hung up around the classroom, they can provide occasions for informal small-group practice or individual rehearsal at other times in the day. Texts for choral reading should have strong rhythms and cadences and varied and interesting "phrasing" (in the musical sense). Poetry is excellent, and songs especially will help teach phrasing and rhythm, since the melody usually parcels out word phrases according to musical phrases.

Texts that contain possibilities for different voice parts are useful for dividing a chorus into subgroups having different "roles." These voice parts might represent not just different characters but different moods, themes, places, or other elements that shift or repeat in a text. Deciding together how to assign text to subgroups can become a valuable part of preparing a choral reading and proves a very effective teacher of literature. And dividing a chorus into voice parts prepares very well for individual reading of roles in play scripts.

Working with photocopies, a transparency projection, a chalkboard, or easel-stand poster enables the group to annotate the text with "stage directions" about how to read certain lines and who is to read them. Annotations can be written in by a leader as the group tries out and decides on various renderings.

Some leader is needed both during this arranging of the text and during practice. You or a student can conduct the group somewhat like an orchestral or singing conductor, working out certain hand and head signals for changing volume, tempo, and so on. Depending on the literacy proficiency of the students, the leader may need a pointer to synchronize voice with text. After some whole-class experience in choral reading, the activity may be pursued by subgroups of the class with the aid of only activity directions, if needed. The conductor may be needed during performance as well as rehearsal, as for a musical concert.

On occasion you might proceed by dividing the class into groups, each of which works out its own rendering of the text. Then you bring the groups back together after each has worked up its own version. Let them perform for each other and compare versions toward the selection of a final rendering to do as a single large group. This process should help prepare the students for later work in self-directed groups.

Large group or small, the steps for choral reading are these:

1. Choose a selection and read it together or in pairs until everyone understands it.
2. Decide how to arrange the text for a choral reading. Although there are books that do this for you, the process of working out a good arrangement is a valuable one, so students should be encouraged to do their own arranging.
3. Have each person read a line so you can decide if his voice is high, medium, or low. Group all the voices of the same range together and use them for certain lines.
4. Decide together which, if any, lines should be spoken by a solo voice, a subgroup, or the whole group and whether such lines would best be vocalized by high, low, medium, mixed, or other sort of voices.
5. Read through the entire selection as arranged and make changes if needed to emphasize the important parts.
6. Practice expressive fluency by making a list of the most important words and phrases and then reading them aloud in quick succession, one after another, changing voice and facial expression rapidly as the meaning changes.
7. Read through the complete text again, using a different volume level for each different idea. Decide which volume and pitch level is best for each part to clarify the meaning. Try out various kinds of phrasing, intonation, and other vocal expression.
8. Experiment with pace. Decide which lines should be spoken more slowly, which more rapidly.
9. Decide who is going to read the solo or duo parts.
10. Rehearse; tape the rehearsals to hear which parts, if any, need more work. You may decide to add a guitar, piano, humming, or other accompaniment.

Share your voice chorus with an audience.

SPECIAL TECHNIQUES FOR GIVING A REHEARSED READING

■ READERS THEATER

Definitions of Readers Theater vary somewhat. We're using the term to mean a rehearsed reading of a text in such a manner as to establish the locus of the piece not onstage with the readers but rather offstage in the imagination of the audience. The performers of Readers Theater see the action as they read and project that vision to the audience. Instead of acting out the play in a realistic manner, they suggest character by using voice, facial expression, and stylized gesture. Action is symbolized and implied; the audience fills in the details. In this sense Readers Theater is closely allied to the performance of radio scripts, which also rely on vivid oral rendering and the imagination of the audience. Readers may assume several roles apiece by creating different voices for different characters, one of whom may be a narrator or other sort of presence. For the very versatile, a one-person show is possible.

Staging is simple, bordering on stark. A common arrangement for Readers Theater is for players to sit or stand in a line in front of the audience, but sometimes they deploy themselves on two or three platforms of different levels to sug-

gest certain relationships in time, space, or status. Typically, stools for the actors to sit on are the only props, although minimal lighting and costuming are sometimes used.

Usually readers have scripts in hand, although some groups prefer to memorize their lines. This option depends on how much emphasis one is to give to voice and how much to gesture. In the conventions of Readers Theater, the script is a way to distance the audience from the physical action and to place a premium on language.

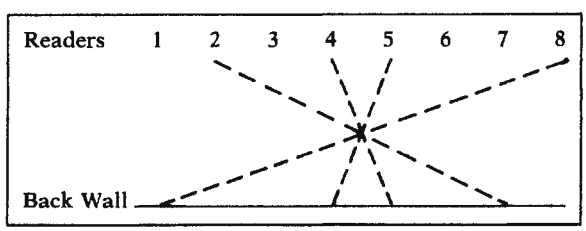
When speaking, the readers may look somewhere over the heads of the audience at a spot on the back wall. They pretend that a mirror hangs there and that all of them are reflected in it (see Figure 8.2). When reader number eight speaks to reader number two, he looks at number two's imagined reflection on the back wall. Their eye lines cross in the middle of the audience. If readers four and five are speaking, their eye lines appear to be almost parallel. It seems odd at first, but then it becomes clear: they are talking to one another even though they are not looking at one another. This "offstage" focus is a unique technique of Readers Theater. It's an indirect way of visually addressing both the other characters and the audience that distances the drama, all while effecting a more direct and personal relationship with an audience than is customary in a conventional play. The relation is like that of reader to book. Perhaps just because Story Theater (see pages 188–190) and Readers Theater bring texts to life, they have proved very popular in schools.

MATERIAL

Play scripts make convenient Readers Theater material because all that students have to do is cut them to suit the time limits and adapt stage directions to the techniques of indirection described above. Adapting other literature like poems or short stories poses a greater challenge, but Readers Theater has had the greatest success precisely with adaptations, no doubt because in bringing to the stage texts not written for performance it uniquely fills a special need. Like the popular taped readings of books for home and car stereo, it utilizes another medium to bring people and books together.

Not surprisingly, then, producers of Readers Theater often make scripts out of texts most people would probably not read on their own, like personal and public documents of various sorts. Instead of merely adapting fictional dramas from literature, popular productions have often capitalized on the inherent drama in

FIGURE 8.2 OFF-STAGE-FOCUS TECHNIQUES IN READERS THEATER



Source: Floren Harper.

biography, history, or issue-centered material. Dylan Thomas's radio script *Under Milk Wood; A Play for Voices* evokes small town life from personal memory, and Jerome Kilty's *Dear Liar* pieces together correspondence between George Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell.

Some of the most successful Readers Theater scripts, in fact, are collages of extremely diverse reading matter, including not only snatches of stories and songs but also nonliterary material such as ads, signs, notices, documents, memoranda, and news articles—any sort of material that may relate to the theme or subject matter of the script. Thus, like Martin Duberman's *In White America*, many Readers Theater scripts are documentaries, made up of many kinds of writing not originally intended to be part of a script.

So student scripts can relate rather directly not only to adaptation of literature but to radio-scripting and to documentaries, with the very interesting possibility of developing and orchestrating an idea or a theme by selecting and sequencing excerpts from many kinds of reading matter. Scripts especially created for Readers Theater are available and might give students an idea of its possibilities[2], but making their own scripts should be regarded as a major part of doing Readers Theater. Whenever students select materials from different sources, juxtapose them, and add transitions, they face problems common to most composing. In order to collage a script together students actually have to rewrite and write as well, starting with the simple deletion of "he said" and other conversions of narrative-to-script and ranging on to the writing of introductions and continuities to glue together their collage. Of course, students may prefer instead to write a wholly original script or to collage some of their other written work.

PROCEDURE

Readers Theater can be introduced to students of any age who seem ready to specialize their other rehearsed reading in this direction. The group size for Readers Theater varies substantially, depending on the nature of the material used and the experience of the students. Keep in mind that each person may play more than one role. Small groups, even a pair, are usually better for beginners. Groups of four or five are sufficiently large to provide an interesting diversity of points of view for the task talk and can cover a number of voices if individuals are experienced. If inexperienced, better to keep down the number of roles so that a larger group won't be necessary.

Timing becomes especially important if students are creating a script as well as rehearsing it. For certain students, script-making plus rehearsal may do well to evolve slowly over an extended period concurrently with other activities. In making their own scripts, students need to read extensively enough to gather the necessary material and intensively enough to perceive the potential of the selections for Readers Theater. Then they need time for sessions of mixing discussion, writing, and rehearsal. During the first several days of the rehearsal period, students

---

[2] The Readers Theater Script Service, P.O. Box 178333, San Diego, CA 92177, sells script packets for all ages and video cassettes of skilled performances. The Institute for Readers Theater, P.O. Box 79193, San Diego, CA 92117, gives workshops and puts out *Readers Theater News*. Look for a similar organization in your region, often represented at meetings of local affiliates of the National Council of Teachers of English.

work on interpreting the texts for themselves. As each person reads, it's best to let the words suggest images to play in his mind, to create, as it were, a visual presentation, a film in his head as he reads. Then he can begin to use his voice as if it were an accompaniment to the film. He can decide what the character he's assuming is like and read his lines as if he were that character. He can compare his rendering of a role with that of others in his group, and based on these trials the group can decide who will read which lines. They can experiment with several students reading each part or with each person playing several roles. In order to understand how to read their lines aloud, they must naturally pay attention to specific features of the text that provide cues, such as punctuation, pronunciation, and definition of words. The rendition evolves as fellow readers coach each other and continue to revise the script and staging. A group may decide to appoint a director to facilitate making decisions.

As the vocalizing progresses, the readers consider whether to add stylized, underplayed body movements. If this is done in slow motion, the impact is greater. For example, one group of students[3] staged a fight scene as part of a Readers Theater performance of John Lewis Carlino's *The Brick and the Rose*, a play about a boy who gets hooked on drugs and dies of an overdose of heroin. The players kept the fight scene in offstage focus. They feigned short punches in slow motion aimed not at one another but in the same direction as the eye focus—toward the back wall. The one receiving a blow, also facing the back wall, contracted his body slightly to receive it. The impact of these suggested movements was strong even though the readers held a book in one hand.

MATTERS FOR DISCUSSION/EXPERIMENTATION

- How each reader is to "enter"—by lifting his head from a nodding position, by turning to face the audience, by standing or sitting down, by actually walking onstage, or what? Other changes of position later?
- Aspects of style and variations in style that the readers have to communicate—how to savor the sounds and rhythms of the phrases and sentences, the particular diction and imagery of different voices.
- Whether and when to shift eye focus from offstage to onstage to audience. A narrator might address an audience directly as a host, or characters might address each other directly sometimes to indicate some shift in relationship.
- Changes in volume, pausing, pacing, and other dynamics.[4]

■ STORY THEATER

Story Theater is a technique for dramatizing narratives. As the text of a story is read aloud or delivered from memory by actors representing the narrator and the characters, the action of the story is rendered by others in movement and pantomime and often in music as well. The style is poetically evocative. Story Theater

[3] These students were working with Floren Harper at Staples High School in Stamford, Connecticut.

[4] Floren Harper, "A Readers Theater in Your Classroom," *Connecticut English Journal*, 1 (Spring 1970). We are also indebted to Floren Harper for valuable help with other parts of this chapter.

has special appeal for children, who will enjoy both performing and witnessing it. This makes it also an ideal technique for older students to use in performing for younger ones.

Deciding how to divide up the text is part of the creative process of Story Theater, as it is also for Readers' Theater and Chamber Theater (see pages 190–192). Activity directions, for example, should array the options—to have one narrator throughout, or to have each character take his own narration in addition to his own dialogue, or to have a group play the narrator as a chorus while the characters do their lines and actions, or to have one group as narrator, one group reading dialogue, and another doing actions. If some players do only action, they need not hold scripts and are free to pantomime, thus creating an interesting contrast in dynamics with the relatively immobilized readers, though readers may of course choose to memorize text and thus free themselves also.

Experimenting during rehearsal builds insights about how Story Theater productions can be effective. Players can try out, for example, different ways to accompany or back up a reader or pantomimist who is featured at a given moment—making background sound or movement or chiming in vocally. A group should try out different uses of its members to get across the story and get effects. When the players in their assumed roles feel the need for dialogue, the narration might stop while they improvise it. Story Theater remains faithful to the text but at the same allows transformations to occur. For example, if the narrator says, "So they walked hand-in-hand into the deep forest," he must pace himself by the actors as they discover together if the ground is firm or muddy, if the weather is hot or cold, if the trees are close together or far apart, and so on.

Actors work with only the simplest, most suggestive props, if any, and wear only the simplest costumes, if any. Ordinary objects may symbolize elements in the setting and can sometimes be used to represent more than one object. A ladder or a set of steps, for example, can be a window, a balcony, a mountain, or heaven—or all of these at different points in the story. If all the players are clad in leotards of a neutral color, one monocle, mustache, broom, head bandanna, glittery necklace, or handcuff can very effectively suggest a character and his stance in relation to the others.

MATERIAL

Paul Sills's production, *Story Theater*, is probably the best-known professional example of this technique. Audiences delight in the way his company is able to lead them into a world of dreams where the imagination was needed, where the audience experienced creation right along with the performers. John-Michael Tebelak's *Godspell* was another Broadway production that relied heavily on Story Theater techniques. It drew on Biblical parables, and the material that best lends itself to Story Theater is such simple narrative—stories from the oral tradition such as fables, myths, legends, and folk tales that are stripped down to action.

PROCEDURE

As usual, take an inexperienced class through once or twice yourself. Then let subgroups of the class do it with their own director, following activity directions. One way to introduce Story Theater is to have the class choose a story, break into groups, and each develop one scene from the story, if the children are very young,

or develop the whole story. If each group does a scene, these can be strung together for a whole performance; if each does the whole story, these different renderings can be compared. A third possibility is for each group to do a different story and present it to the others. Whichever of these three you choose, you should move around among groups helping them discuss decisions about how to perform the text.

Warm-ups are crucial for Story Theater. Begin with some theater games such as mirror exercises that call for sensitivity to one another and to what is evolving. Players need to sense when one player is to take the lead and the rest are to support his improvisation and when all are to pantomime as a group. Next, you or another leader can call out objects or animals that figure in the story and have the players get together in groups to form these shapes with their combined bodies—for example, a cow, a tall beanstalk, a golden goose. This helps them learn to collaborate spatially and to avoid stereotyping things. For example, if three or four students have to combine themselves into a tree, they are less likely to stand in a traditional "tree" pose and more able to change to a tree swaying in the breeze, blown by a gale, budding with blossoms, or frozen in ice.

SELF-DIRECTED GROUPS

After selection of a story, encourage general discussion about what happened, what the characters are like, and what mood or theme needs to be brought out. Then as one person reads the text, everyone else can pantomime all the actions simultaneously (as for "Pantomime" on page 181) just to get a feeling of the events and how they flow in the tale. For a second read-through, some members can volunteer to read or pantomime parts and others can take turns reading the narration or dialogue. By a combination of discussion and trials, the group can cast and get into rehearsals, which become a kind of perpetual composition. Again, members may want to make someone the director to facilitate final decisions.

■ CHAMBER THEATER

Another dramatic mode we highly recommend is Chamber Theater. It was originated by Robert S. Breen of Northwestern University and further developed by Carolyn Fitchett Bins. Chamber Theater is a technique for staging narrative texts that takes full advantage of all theatrical devices available but at the same time preserves the original narration. The chief distinction is that an actor plays the narrator while other actors play the characters. Chamber Theater has the advantage of dramatizing the very element of written narrative that poses a problem for some readers—namely, the presence in the text of a storyteller's voice and controlling intelligence mediating between the reader and the action.

MATERIAL

The only material for Chamber Theater is narrative text, and the text becomes a script with virtually no changes. This may be any short story, folk tale, narrative poem, or nonfictional account such as memoir, reportage, or biography, including students' own writing. Broadway productions that employed Chamber Theater technique are Edward Albee's treatment of Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café,* Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as directed by Erwin Piscator, and James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as adapted by Frederick Ewen, Phoebe Brand, and John Randolph.

PROCEDURE

A small group begins Chamber Theater by choosing a short scene from a narrative. A story with a good balance of action, dialogue, and narration works well. The narrative is not rewritten as a play but interpreted dramatically as if already a script except for such minimal changes as removing "said Alberta."

This automatically focuses on the narrator's relationship to the characters and to the audience. In a first-person story one of the characters will be the narrator himself, usually of a former time. The chief ways of indicating these relationships are the narrator's physical position vis-à-vis the characters and the audience, and the division of lines in the text between narrator and characters. Working out passages for staging forces the students to look closely and critically at the text itself, not only to determine what the narrator says but also to infer his tone or how he says it.

Dividing lines between narrator and character does not depend simply on separating narration from the characters' directly quoted speech, or even from their indirectly quoted speech and thoughts. Nor need the divisions of lines coincide with whole sentences. A narrator who is privy to a character's thoughts and feeling may share with him both narration and dialogue. That is, a character may utter certain sentences or clauses of narration that describe his reminiscence or state of mind, just as he may take over from the narrator those portions of indirect discourse that paraphrase what he said or thought. Likewise, when the narrator is recounting events or summarizing a situation in the style of the character, the character may do the speaking. Conversely, during a character's inner debate, the narrator may utter one of the opposing positions to dramatize the conflict of selves. During some of the moments when the minds of the narrator and character become fused in the narration, the actors playing both may decide to read the lines in unison. This interplaying allotment of lines is the most intriguing and original feature of Chamber Theater. It gives topography to a text and throws relationships into relief.

The way the narrator shows his relationship through his physical position dramatizes the fact that a storyteller floats free in time and space. He may stand behind a seated character with his hand on his shoulder and speak either directly to him or to the audience. He may pose aloofly on a raised platform or stair. He may face a character directly and speak to him. He may move close or far away from the audience, address it or not. He may move in and out of scenes or remain central. Thus he is able to indicate stable relationships throughout a story and shifting relationships within a story. He may act omniscient, take a detached stance, speak in a lofty tone. He may speak confidentially about a character's thoughts and feelings or comment satirically about him to the audience. He may become his former self for a while, alternate between objective reporting and identification, and so on. All of these bring out the narrrator's stance, tone, and style.

The important thing in Chamber Theater as in most other student performance is to experiment. Players may decide that there is no "fourth wall" between the characters and the audience, so nothing is hidden from the audience. Instead of making entrances and exits, the actors may decide to remain in the background when they are not in character and move down to the main playing area when they are. They may pantomime the props instead of having actual objects or add actions implied by but not written into the scenes. Scripts may be read or memorized, and the production videotaped. Again, a student may direct.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INCIDENTS

Much of this technique's effectiveness lies in what precedes and follows these readings. One of Carolyn Bins's contributions is in asking students, before they dramatize professional texts, to recount and then enact incidents from their own life. If the story is not initially written but taped, it can be transcribed to create a text.

Students other than the teller may direct versions of the incident and may take the role of narrator without seeing each other's versions; then the student-author himself directs a version, playing himself as narrator while someone else plays him as participant. Interesting combinations are possible. The author's version allows the audience to perceive, visually, just how close the narrator is to the story he is telling. This stance will probably be different from versions that others direct or play narrator in, and these versions can be compared in discussion.

Whether the material is professional writing or their own, comparing versions of Chamber Theater productions provides a chance to sort out points of view more clearly and powerfully than most students are able to do when reading silently. Chamber Theater technique is a brilliant way to translate flat print into tangible human dimensions. This makes it a prime method of studying literature. Unlike adaptations that make narrative into something else (also a legitimate endeavor), it brings out what is peculiar to narrative.[5]

■ SUMMARY OF THE THREE TECHNIQUES

Readers Theater, Story Theater, and Chamber Theater all consist of rehearsed reading. All divide text among actors in creative ways. All evoke rather than simulate realistically. And all assign actors to the narrator role. Whereas Story Theater and Chamber Theater stage narratives only, Readers Theater stages any material whatsoever. In Readers Theater and Story Theater, several actors may play one role or one actor may play several roles, but in Chamber Theater each actor takes one role, as in realistic theater. Each features certain techniques: Story Theater, the interplay of voice and pantomime; Chamber Theater, the interplay between narrator and characters; and Readers Theater, the distancing of action and the evocation of language. Readers Theater is broader, and Story Theater and Chamber Theater are more specialized. Story Theater suits elementary school best, Chamber Theater suits high school best, and Readers Theater suits both very well.

ENACTING SCRIPTS

Acting out memorized scripts is what most teachers think of first when they envision performing texts. This often evokes images of hours of rehearsal and the frantic tension of the final production of a play—complete with costumes, stage, lights, properties, and so on. If this is what performances of texts were as a regular routine, few teachers could justify them as a staple classroom process, as we

---

[5] Chamber Theater provides a splendid dramatic method to accompany *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*, ed. James Moffett and Kenneth McElheny (New York: Penguin USA/New American Library, Mentor series, 1966).

recommend. Occasional performances of memorized scripts for a large audience are enjoyable and stimulating, of course, but regular rehearsed reading, text in hand, for an audience of people at hand is by far the more valuable experience for the total language development of the student.

The point of enacting a memorized script inheres precisely in the fact of an audience. The whole purpose of a script is to hold actors to a presumably superior version of the action, a circumstance of little value to participants playing just for themselves but important to beholders. Scripts can be performed without being memorized, of course. In this case the action is somewhat inhibited by the scripts students hold, but the performers have the advantage of needing less time to get a play ready to share with their peers. Sight-reading of plays is shortest and simplest but worth least. It's all right as a way of becoming acquainted with an easy play, but advances in learning come from the work of rehearsals, which entail rereading, thinking, and discussing.

Play performing should begin much earlier than has been the norm heretofore. Many primary-school children can read a play silently or sight-read together, take the parts of characters and read it as a play in a small group, rehearse it, then perform it from memory or while holding scripts.

■ MATERIAL

The younger the students the more difficult it is to find appropriate play scripts for them, because most plays are written for commercial performance for adults. This provides excellent motivation for students to write their own scripts. But scripts published for school age do exist, sometimes as play anthologies. For beginners of any age scripts of one continuous scene or two or three scenes are best. It's wise to put off very long or difficult plays until students have benefited from some of the other dramatic experience recommended up to now. Otherwise, for one thing, you will end up doing too much. Also, students might often do well to choose their long, difficult plays from among some they already know. For example, let students reading Shakespeare first listen to recordings of his plays as they follow the text, stopping to discuss scenes along the way. Among much else, this gives them pronunciations and meanings of the strange or strangely used words and straightens out intricate sentence constructions.

Rewriting stories or poems into drama scripts is, of course, a valuable composition task and an excellent way to approach literature. Having the author of the script easily available for consultation with the players provides the actors with guidance beyond what is actually written. Student authors also get valuable feedback as the performers and directors face various script problems from which they can all learn: they can't tell how to read a line from the way he has punctuated it, or don't understand the timing of actions or what kind of person a character is, or don't know what the point is of a certain action or speech, or cannot figure out what the set really looks like, and so on.

TRANSCRIPTS

These are a splendid source of scripts that schools rarely take advantage of. Transcripts of interviews, trials, speeches, Congressional debates, talk shows, hearings—all can be performed for an interesting challenge in oral interpretation.

Although not composed or intended for performance, they look, in format, as if they were. While recapitulating the original dialogues, student actors are role-playing various real-life players in the society. Transcripts are potentially dramatic because of the give-and-take, often adversarial (which is why so many fictional dramas contain trial scenes).

Students can edit a transcript into what they consider a performable version. The script of Peter Brooks' Broadway play *The Investigation* is essentially just an assemblage of excerpts from the transcripts of the Nuremberg trials of World War II criminals. In most cases stage directions are not part of a transcript, so students have to fill in action and position according to their interpretation of what's going on. Tone, characterization, motivation, and some of the interplay all have to be inferred from the bare dialogue—a fine kind of practice in comprehension. If possible, recordings of the original dialogues should be found so that students can compare them with their own rendering—after the students have performed them.

■ PROCEDURE

Selecting a script is a process not to be hurried; it provides a good motivation for wide reading to screen many plays. Not only texts but also professional recordings or student-produced tapes can be used for the selection process.

READING IN ROLE

After reading or listening to the play, the group members decide together who will read each part and meet together to read the script aloud. After they do this, they may, in some cases, decide this is not a script they want to perform, and look for another. They can reread the play, rotating roles and working out characterizations, relationships, mood, and theme.

REHEARSALS WITH MOVEMENT

After the students have become familiar with the script and begun to conceive how it should be executed, they're ready to add movement, following but also filling in the stage directions. A student director can block the movement by drawing a ground plan or floor plan and showing entrances, exits, placement of furniture, and levels and stairs that may be used. Then, scripts and pencils in hand, the cast can walk through the action in the playing space, discussing and amending the director's plan. Each actor can write his movements, or blocking, in the margin of his script to show which lines he moves on and where he goes. He should figure out why his character is making each of the moves he makes. When actors become distracted by the figuring out and stop listening and responding well, they can set aside their scripts, improvise the scene, and then go back to coordinating dialogue with movement while holding scripts.

During rehearsals, the cast will discuss whatever problems they have in acting their parts. The director can lead this talk toward decisions or, when disagreement is strong, can make the decisions himself. Directors change from one play to the next, but the most capable students can be appointed at first. Students understand that whoever is director has the last word as regards performance, and that the script can be changed, but only through negotiation with the author in the case of a student script. One typical matter that a group has to decide is the degree of

realism that a given play calls for, in their view. Decisions about realism will affect also the use of props, costumes, lighting, and other aspects of staging.

Halfway through rehearsals, lines should be memorized if they are ever going to be, since depth of character occurs after this is accomplished. Scenes can be videotaped and played back to help the actors evaluate what they are doing. While working on interpretation, you and they can coach speech articulation also, reminding actors to enunciate both vowels and consonants more deliberately—without losing feeling and dramatic momentum.

The first full run-through of the play should be a nonstop performance. If at all possible, videotape this. The director can also take notes to give the cast afterward. A double-time or fast rehearsal is good at some point to help concentrate on picking up cues. This can be done while sitting down if each player tells his action as he says his lines: "Moving to chair. 'Whew!' He sits." The director should make sure everyone can be seen and heard in every part of the audience area. An audience can be invited to see a run-through and make comments. Then comes a technical rehearsal for final adjustments by the technical crew, and finally a full dress rehearsal with costumes if the cast has decided to wear them.[6]

THE VALUE OF PERFORMING TEXTS

The processes involved in performing obviously *develop interpersonal skills*. Students get better at discussion as they practice it during selecting and rehearsing of texts. They also learn how to give and take constructive criticism. They have an opportunity to overcome shyness gradually and to develop poise before others. The pressure of putting together a performance emphasizes a common goal and puts a premium on working effectively together.

Like all oral performing, enacting texts *teaches "speech"* in the sense of articulation and elocution. In this curriculum such vocal traits as musicality, dynamics, enunciation, and expressiveness are considered factors of feeling and involvement that can develop best in speaking situations that release feeling and tie into real motives. Performing texts makes good articulation and expression a practical matter about which the student usually welcomes feedback and coaching.

In rereading, rehearsing, and performing a published script, *one comes to possess the language* in it. This means that students enrich their native vocabulary, phrasing, sentence structure, speech rhythms, and dialects by incorporating those of creative writers beyond their immediate world. This is a much more powerful imprinting than occurs from merely reading a text once silently. And of course such new intake influences how a student speaks, writes, and reads in the future.

As audience for other students' performances, an individual becomes acquainted with more dramatic works than he would read alone. After a while he becomes a fairly sophisticated playgoer, ready for professional productions, and at the same time *becomes conversant with dramatic literature* of his maturity level. This happens not just from the turnabout sharing of performances but also from the sifting and discussing of scripts that goes on as different groups try to select

---

[6] A good acting primer for high school students is Charles McGaw and Gary Blake, *Acting Is Believing: A Basic Method*, 5th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986).

ones they want. This collective knowledge is absorbed by individuals and also stimulates them to read.

As a performer, a student *deepens his reading comprehension.* At the same time, he externalizes it, providing the teacher with a clue as to how well he understands what he has read. In order to interpret well, a student must read carefully and critically, taking on, if necessary, a new language style and tone and making it his own. The consulting of textual notes and the analysis of text, so tedious in silent reading, come more easily as part of the practical and social process of working up a performance. The emphasis that dramatic treatment places on speaker, voice, and circumstance of utterance helps a student gain insight into all the literature he reads, whether aloud or silently. The careful reading that the performing process demands leads to insightful and authentic discussion about literature in order to solve problems of interpretation that are real and immediate.

From the reader's point of view, then, any text is a script. It leaves much to be completed by the reader from experience and imagination. In both rehearsing and directing scripts, one learns to fill out the text. Without a narrator or other authorial host, one has to infer more in reading scripts than perhaps any other sort of text. Who explains why the characters do what they do, what they have in their heads, what the point of a scene is? In drama as in raw life itself, you have to learn to become your own guiding interpreter. Students used to treating all texts as scripts will understand intuitively that they must actively take over what they read and make it mean something. To do this they role-play the writer himself and recreate his voice, his intonations as indicated by punctuation, his style or tone as indicated by word choice and sentence construction, and his ideas and intentions as indicated by pattern and organization. Silent reading is playing out a text on the stage of the mind.[7]

---

[7] *Teaching Theater* is a national journal that teachers may find most helpful. It is published by Educational Theatre Association, 3368 Central Parkway, Cincinnati, OH, 45225-2392, which also sponsors conferences around the country at which workshops are given relating to activities in this chapter and in Chapter 5.