PFA 102 DRAMA AND THEATRE

**HOW TO SEE A PLAY**

Reading a play a play and watching a performance are different sorts of activities. The play text comes to us only as words on a page. The performance that we see results from a synthesis, a putting together of several arts- the written text, the actors, the scenery, costumes, and lighting. Text is repeatable, but performance is ephemeral- we watch it moment by moment, responding to many stimuli (sensual, emotional, and intellectual) and unconsciously fusing them into a whole.

The written text appeals to our intellect, and emotions; performance in the theatre appeals most immediately to our senses and only through them to our intellect and emotions.

Studying a play is therefore different from studying a performance. In studying a play text, we analyze- we take a play apart to see how it might work on stage. In studying a performance, “we take in” through our senses (mostly sight and hearing) and see/hear how it does work on stage. In analyzing a play, we can stop and think, or return to a difficult passage and reconsider it. In studying a performance, we watch and hear a moment go by in real time; later we can only recall (not retrieve) that moment. For such reasons, criticism of performance requires an approach somewhat different from that of play analysis.

Performance criticism can use, cautiously, Aristotle’s six parts of a play text, but with the understanding that the nature of theatre radically alters the relationships among these parts. For example, spectacle is primary because theatre is visual. (Modern theatre especially has endowed spectacle with great meaning- in lights ability to focus attention and create mood, in setting’s and costumes ability to give information about time, and place, and so on) In the analysis of a play text, plot, character, idea, and language dominate. But in the analysis of a performance, these four parts (residing mostly in the play) are submerged within and expressed through music and spectacle, through being spoken by actors and appearing physically on stage.

An example can clarify this point: character in a play text is revealed only through written words and intellectual constructs called decisions. Character in performance, however, is revealed through the work of the actor, for whom the written text (and its six parts) is the basis of the artistic creation but is not the artistic creation itself. Character in performance depends not only on what the words of the play say but also on what the actor does- with voice, body, costume, and make up. To discover character in performance (to understand what the actor is doing with and to the text) means to ask not only the questions asked during play analysis but another set as well, including such questions as these: How does the actor say the words? How does the actor react to the words and actions of others? How does he or she stand? Move? Wear costumes? Create rhythms? Create images?

Performance criticism thus introduces a whole new set of questions to textual analysis: what are the arts of the actor, the scenic designer, the costume designer, and the lighting designer? And how are these arts fused with the written play?

Play analysis examines only the art of the playwright; performance criticism, however, examines the arts of the other theatre makers as well. For this reason, Aristotelian analysis remain a good starting point for thinking about performance, but it is only a starting point; it must be supplemented.

In reading a play, the plot, characters, and idea claim first attention; in watching a performance, on the other hand, the spectacle, music, and language (what is seen and heard) dominate.

**Play**  **Performance**

|  |
| --- |
| Plot  Character  idea |

|  |
| --- |
| Spectacle  Music  Language |

**More important to play More important to Performance**

|  |
| --- |
| Language  Music  Spectacle |

**Less important to play analysis**

**Less important to performance**

|  |
| --- |
| Idea  Character  Plot |