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What’s the Point?: a “Bohemian Family” in Text vs. Theater

The decision to read plays for their literary value alone is a curious one, and one that has puzzled me for years. Reading a play without also viewing it is as ridiculous as the notion of only reading a description of a famous work of art, or only of studying a musical score. While studying artwork and music helps me appreciate it more, nevertheless I still would go to a museum to see a painting for myself, or listen to Shostakovich at a symphony performance. Luckily this semester I was able to watch Noël Coward’s play *Hay Fever* performed on-campus at Thompson Theatre. As a general precept, I believe that plays should be seen on stage since that is its intended medium. Moreover, viewing a play presents new insights to the meaning and purpose, whereas reading a play might cause the reader to probe for a meaning that was not intended by the playwright. Although I dare not say that plays should be viewed and not read, a theater production provides a more wholly interactive and dynamic experience than the printed word. Because of these realities, I strongly urge all readers to also view plays and watch as the scenes unravel in unanticipated ways—undoubtedly changing many preconceived notions about the characters, plot, and point of the play.

My first feeling at the beginning of the production was one of consolation—*great* consolation. Since I come from an extremely artistic (oftentimes dramatic) family, I attempted to empathize with the characters when reading the play, and as a result *completely* underestimated their lunacy. Originally, I related most to Sorel, who adamantly detested her family’s melodramatic nature and wished to remedy her “bad manners.” Because I was empathizing with her character, I interpreted the scene with the argument over the word-guessing game as her being exasperated with her family. When watching the scene, Sorel’s attitude was not one of exasperation but childish, throwing a tantrum like a little girl. I realized then that Sorel was just as zany as the rest of the Blisses, although a little more self-aware of the fact. The Blisses require neither empathy nor sympathy—that should be reserved for their guests. The stage directions and lines came to life on the stage in ways I never would have dreamed of, and I definitely laughed more than when reading it. Part of the magic of the theater is that characters are no longer ambiguous and impersonal words on the page, but have a face, voice, and personality that is easier to convey feelings and actions. The theater experience is not only more interactive with the characters and actions, but with the audience as well. Most anyone will agree that watching a movie is more enjoyable when you have other people to share the experience with—especially when that movie is a comedy. Most people will not laugh unless they have other people to laugh with them, and the theater provides this experience. Furthermore, sometimes people do not realize that a line or action is funny until others’ laughter encourages them to join in. The entertainment value of a play can be overlooked when reading it as literature, and seeing it on stage can help correct this problem.

In my opinion, the best part about theater productions is the opportunity to experience other people’s interpretations of the play. Not only do the actors each have their own distinct interpretations, but the stage director, scene designer, and costume designer also have *their* interpretations. Except through class discussion and reading about others’ interpretations in books, readers only have their own opinions with which to approach the play. Judith Bliss by far was the prize gem of the cast, followed closely by her ornery maid Clara. The lines and situations composed by Noël Coward are hysterically dramatic enough to make her character highly entertaining, but the actress enhances Judith Bliss’s silliness by adding inventions of her own. For example, when she comes in from the garden in the first act and tries to put on her own shoes, she keeps placing them on the wrong feet. Moreover, her tremendous flirtatiousness exudes from her in every way, whether she is flouncing on the couch asking for a cigarette in an evocative manner, or running like a silly girl in the background being chased by Sandy Tyrell. Clara, on the other hand, embodied sarcasm in its entirety, surpassing Coward’s lines with her actions. During the two intermissions she continued the comedy with her blasé manner while cleaning up the Bliss’s manor—puffing her cigarette, lounging between chores, and even swiping a few glasses of the Bliss’s liquor. The scenery played up Judith Bliss’s egotism by placing an unfinished portrait of her in the back (probably by Simon) and play posters covering the right wall. The scene designer even poked fun at Judith’s futile attempt to garden by painting a poster of a play called *Allergies*. The costumes were as I expected except for Myra, but everything about Myra was different than I expected. Aside from the flamboyant costumes that seemed out of touch with the character’s cool and practical manner, her posture bothered me to no end. Her back was curved backward in what looked to be an extremely uncomfortable position, making her appear both older and more severe in personality. Although I disagree whole heartedly with the interpretation of Myra, it nevertheless proves how important it is for readers to also view plays. I neither could have come up with that masterful of a set nor costumes, and the acting afforded different takes on the characters.

Although I hate to sound overly philosophical, I reason that the point of *Hay Fever* is that *there is no point*. It is human nature to look for meaning (as proven by the number of religions in the world), and art for the sake of entertainment alone was nearly unheard of until the recent past. Even as early as Shakespeare, theater served two different purposes, and for two different audiences—those who wished to be entertained and those who wished to intellectualize. Shakespeare crafted his plays so they could entertain the masses, while also satisfying the aristocracy’s craving for something intellectual and meaningful. The Bliss family’s insistence on “artificial” drama in their daily lives proves that they have no meaning in their lives aside from their arts—just like the play itself. The Bliss’s guests attempt to make sense of their actions and romantic propositions, which is their biggest mistake. For example, when Myra praises David Bliss’s keen insight about women in one of his novels, he adamantly denies knowing anything about women at all. Like most people, Myra created a vision of the author based on a meaning she invented, only to find out that she was terribly mistaken about David’s keen insight in the conversation and events that ensued. In fact, Noël Coward’s attitude is quite redolent of William Wordsworth, who claims, “Our meddling intellect / Misshapes the beauteous forms of things; / —We murder to dissect.” Although Wordsworth is championing nature and experience above book-learning, the quote still applies.

Unfortunately, theatre productions are not accessible in most cases, and teachers and students must strive to find alternate ways to bring the experience into the classroom. Film interpretations of plays are a decent substitute for an actual theatre experience. Just like a theatre production, the viewer can experience different interpretations through the actors, stage director, and costume and set designers. Unless the film is of a live play, however, there are drawbacks to film adaptations. First and foremost is the fact that film is a different medium than theatre, and often directors attempt to enhance the play by adding effects only available to the film industry: added sets/scenes; popular actors in roles whether or not they are suited for them; changing or removing parts of the play; and close-ups in the camera and other camera effects. This can produce exceedingly artificial and inaccurate renditions of plays, as evidenced by *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, and Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd*. Nevertheless, some film adaptations stay true to the text and are worth using in conjunction with reading a play. Another alternative is to act the play during class, having students take turns playing the different roles. Although the readers lack the costumes and scenery, there are several opportunities for different interpretations of characters based on the students’ views. For instance, when my high school English class was reading George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, I played the part of Eliza Doolittle and made the constant “Ah-ah-ah-ow-ow-ow-oo!” exclamations and “kerbstone English” accent to the best of my abilities. In fact, by speaking Eliza’s part out loud, the other students realized just how irritating her accent and exclamations were—even begging me to stop. Although one can read and imagine her voice, hearing it is quite a different experience.

Overall, if the opportunity presents itself, people should watch theatre productions in addition to reading plays. When reading a play it is all too easy to fall into a trap like searching for a meaning that is not there, or missing out on its entertainment value. At the theatre, you experience a collaboration of several minds working to create convincing characters, scenery, and costumes. Moreover, you are able to enjoy the humor by laughing with an audience instead of inwardly by yourself. One way or another, I highly recommend finding a way to see a play that you are reading, even if it is a film version, or at least acting it out in class. Whether for entertainment, discovering the purpose of the play, or both, watching a theatre production of a play is something that every conscientious bookworm should do.