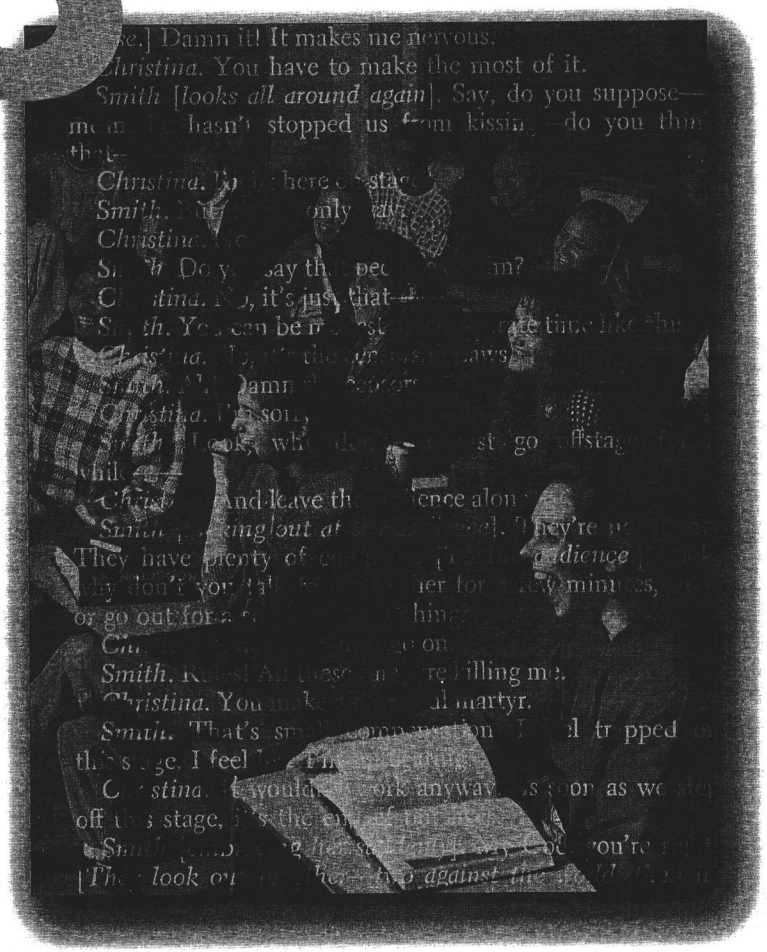
5 Your Role as Audience and Evaluator



As we previously stated, the basic components of the interpretation process are a performer (you), a text, and an audience. The first four chapters of Part 1 focused on you and the text; this chapter focuses on the third aspect of the interpretation experience: the audience. In reality, you will probably spend more time in your class acting the roles of audience member and evaluator than the role of performer, so it is essential that these roles receive more than passing mention.

Although you are always your own audience in interpretation—listening to yourself, making discoveries, altering decisions, evaluating each rehearsal and performance—this chapter will focus on your role as audience for and evaluator of the performances of others. Much of what we say concerning your role as audience will be useful to you when you listen to and appraise your own performances.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

Your responsibilities as an audience member are composed of four distinct but related functions: *to listen, to constitute, to accept*, and *to respond*. In other words, audience members must be prepared to listen attentively, to create their impression of what they see and hear, to be objective and open-minded, and to provide feedback. Let us analyze each of these related functions.

Your Role as Audience: To Listen

Listening is a skill which must be developed. Whereas *hearing* is a natural physiological process, listening is a psychological or mental process which demands practice and concentration. Although we spend 40 to 50 percent of our day engaged in listening activities, we know very little about the process. We hear sounds, but we must learn how to make sense of them. As an audience member, your first responsibility is to listen—to give the reader your full attention. This, however, is not as easy as it sounds.

We stress the importance of listening because the interpreter depends on, expects to have, and deserves a receptive audience. One of the reasons interpreters perform is to share their discovery of a text with an audience. We owe them our attention, but barriers often get in the way. The barriers are real and can prevent sharing from taking place; you must want to overcome the barriers and consciously work at surmounting them to be a good listener.

The barriers to good listening fall into three categories: *external* barriers, which are situational; *internal* barriers, which are audience centered; and *semantic* barriers, which are text or performance centered. What causes each of these barriers and how can each best be overcome?

External barriers

External barriers are disturbances that exist inside or outside the communication environment. External barriers also exist within a performer. The following are some situations which can cause external barriers:

1. The temperature in the room is too hot or too cold.
2. There is noise or disturbance outside the room.
3. The lights in the room are too bright, too dim, or flickering.
4. The performer speaks too fast or too slow, has a speech defect, moves around too much, jangles pocket change, is too loud or soft, cannot be seen, or wears distracting apparel.
5. A noise or disturbance occurs inside the room.

When any of these situations (or many others) occur, communication between interpreter and audience is inhibited.

Performers can anticipate and correct some external disturbances prior to the performance. They can select clothes with care (preferably with no writing on them), and they can check the lights, the seating arrangement, and the acoustics of the room ahead of time. The audience members can avoid some external barriers by adjusting to the temperature, closing the doors, ignoring outside stimuli, changing seats, or by doing anything that helps them to concentrate. Concentration is the key to improving communication and eliminating barriers. The performer can help by anticipating barriers; audience members can help by not causing disturbances and by not letting barriers distract them—by concentrating.

Internal barriers

Another kind of barrier that can occur during a performance results from an internal situation. An internal barrier exists within an audience member and can be just as harmful as an external barrier in preventing communication from occurring. The following are some situations that cause internal barriers:

1. The audience member has to perform the same day and is too nervous, upset, or scared to listen.
2. The audience member has just performed and is too relieved, excited, or anxious to listen.
3. The audience member stayed up too late and is too tired to listen.
4. The audience member has just experienced a major excitement or disturbance and is thinking of that instead of listening.

The best counter for internal barriers is the desire to listen. If you decide that the performer has something valuable and worthwhile to share and you might miss something important, your listening is sharpened. You must want to listen well. Once again, concentration is important. If your point of concentration is on the performance and not on yourself, your listening skills will improve. Of course, the performer, too, can eliminate internal barriers by motivating and maintaining audience interest.

Semantic barriers

The last kind of barrier that can occur is called a semantic barrier. Semantic barriers are text-centered or performance-centered barriers. The following are some situations causing semantic barriers:

1. The selection is too easy or too familiar, and the listener tunes it out.
2. The selection is too difficult or complex.
3. The selection is confusing because the performer did not adequately prepare the audience for it in the introduction.
4. The selection is one for which the listener has a conflicting interpretation that makes listening difficult.

To overcome these barriers, you may have to ask the performer for clarification before the performance begins, if this is possible. If it is not possible, you must try to objectify your response. If the text is too easy or too familiar, convince yourself that there may be something new in the selection or something that this performer may bring to the text that is different. If the selection seems too difficult or too complex, try even harder to listen. Remember, some texts—in fact, many texts—cannot be totally understood after only one hearing. Often we need to hear a selection again and again before we can begin to come to terms with it. If a selection is difficult, get what you can after one exposure. Then, read the selection yourself and spend some time analyzing it. A really good performance sends audience members to read the text for themselves.

In general, minimize semantic barriers by being objective and open-minded. Work with the performer as he or she performs; this brings us to your second responsibility as an audience member.

Your Role as Audience: To Constitute

In Chapter 1 we spoke of the empowerment the reader has been given in determining what a text has to say. Meaning forms in the reader, not in the black marks on the white page. If this is true of the reader, it is also true of the audience. Just as performers devise their understanding of texts and reveal that understanding through performance, each audience member devises his or her own understanding depending on background, past experiences, interests, preoccupations, and so

forth. We call this *constituting* meaning. While the performer performs, the audience also performs by creating meaning.

To constitute meaning, the audience obviously must be paying close attention and must be willing to participate in the creation of the characters, setting, and other elements in their imaginations. The interpreter depends upon the involvement of the audience. In a play performance, for example, the playwright expects certain elements of spectacle to accompany the production: set, costumes, lights, make-up, and so on. The interpreter suggests the sense of more than one character, suggests the scenery and set pieces in the hope that audience members' natural ability to imagine will flesh out the suggested elements. Were a solo performer to do the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, the performer would hope that audience members would constitute their conceptions of the balcony, the appropriate make-up and costumes, the nighttime garden setting, and Romeo as well as Juliet. The audience, then, performs and creates, just as the performer does.

Your Role as Audience: To Accept

Your third responsibility is related to the points we made concerning the desire to listen. When you *accept* a performance, this means that you are giving the performer the chance to communicate his or her unique interpretation with you. Try to minimize barriers and eliminate all prejudices as you listen. You may not like the performer or the selection, you may not immediately understand the selection, or you may know the selection and have what you believe to be a better interpretation. Regardless of your relationship with the performer or with the selection, try to get as much as you can out of the performance by maintaining an open mind in regard to a literary selection that may not personally appeal to you or to an interpretation you do not agree with. It is from our ability to maintain an open mind, coupled with our desire to learn, that we gain new information and new insights as we empathize with the attitudes and beliefs of another. You get the experience of doing something by watching someone else do it.

Acceptance will make your evaluation of the performance more meaningful for the performer. Acceptance means that you are listening to the performer's interpretation with enough objectivity to be able to describe later what you heard and saw—not what you would have done or your negative reaction to the text being performed. Be receptive: this is the way you grow. As already stated many times, if a selection has universality, individuality, and suggestion, it can be interpreted in more than one way. Allow the performer to investigate alternatives with you.

Your Role as Audience: To Respond

Your last responsibility as an audience member is to be actively receptive, to *respond*. This means you give the performer *feedback* during a performance.

Feedback involves sending messages to the performer that indicate your reaction to the performance. There are two basic kinds of feedback that can be sent during a performance: situational feedback and text- or performance-centered feedback.

If, for example, you cannot see or hear the performer, what kind of nonverbal response can you send that will communicate this to the performer? Although you may think this action is potentially distracting, most performers would be grateful to receive such helpful information. This first kind of feedback is situational feedback.

The second kind of feedback is text- or performance-centered. In Chapter 4, we explained how the interpreter tries to transform the actual audience into the implied audience in the text. The speaker in a text usually has some specific listener(s) in mind. As you become this implied audience, you help the interpreter by giving the kind of feedback appropriate for the implied audience. Laughs, nods, sighs, applause—whatever you think is expected or you feel motivated to give—can be involved in this kind of feedback.

Some of your responsibilities, problems, and challenges as audience members are summarized here:

Responsibilities: To Listen To Constitute To Accept To Respond
Problems: External Barriers Internal Barriers Semantic Barriers
Challenges: Concentrate Be Objective Participate

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS AN EVALUATOR

Often you are given the opportunity to let performers know how well you think they interpreted the text. Although we would all probably prefer to be told we are wonderful and need no improvement, we can all benefit from honest, constructive criticism. Artists work constantly to express the fullest potential of their medium of expression. What better way can there be to determine at least a portion of that potential than by gaining thoughtful feedback from the audience? As your performance is evaluated, receive the evaluation in the spirit in which it is intended. We want to help you discover your potential, and our suggestions are aimed toward that end.

The role of evaluator is difficult for many beginning interpreters. They often do not believe they know enough to respond to another's performance, or they may be convinced that their contribution is not important. They sometimes worry that if they are too critical they will alienate the performer. The responsibility of evaluating is aided when the performer states in the introduction his or her interpretation of the text. When this is done, the evaluator should ask if the performance manifested the interpretation articulated in the introduction. Evaluators then need not

feel compelled to say how they interpret selections, but instead can focus on what the performers intended and how well those intentions came through in performance. The following suggestions are meant to aid you in the evaluation process.

General Guidelines for Evaluation

As you participate in an evaluation session, keep in mind that the interpreter depends on your reactions to aid him or her in preparing additional presentations of the same selection and in preparing future performances. Even though you may be a beginning interpreter, you have something important to contribute. Audiences are very rarely composed of skilled interpreters! Audiences are primarily made up of people like you. Everyone is entitled to an opinion—especially if that opinion is supported. Critical comments are always useful to the interpreter if they are honest, constructive, tactfully given, and supported with reasons for making them. It is never enough merely to say "I liked it" or "I didn't like it." The interpreter needs to know *why*. You must verbalize your responses and explain your critical position carefully to be of maximum benefit to the performer. The most essential aspect of evaluation is to remember what the performer said in the introduction as to what he or she intended to do in the performance and relate your comments to that intention. In other words, your comments should focus on whether the performance demonstrated that intention. Let us examine some ways to make your role as evaluator the most beneficial.

One way to make your evaluations complete and specific is to take notes while the interpreter performs. If you are to hear a relatively few number of performances, these need be mental notes only. If, however, you are to hear many performances, you may actually want to write down your notes as unobtrusively as possible, keeping your attention on the performer. In an abbreviated form, write down what was effective and what was not as effective as specifically as you can. Write down specific lines from the text, if need be, to clarify your evaluation. The notes will help you remember what you want to say later and can be used to support your opinions.

As you prepare to participate in an evaluation session, one of the most important suggestions we can make is the following: *Analyze the performance techniques employed in terms of the interpretation.* For example, you might want to say, "I thought you spoke too rapidly," or "You were too loud," or "You were too soft," or "You stood too close to me," and so on. However, these bold statements evaluate the performance techniques without relating these techniques to the performer's particular interpretation of a text. The comment about a too-rapid pace might not be true if the interpreter were performing a scene from Eudora Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O." In this story, the narrator's (Sister's) pace is affected by the fact that she is probably speaking to an audience of impatient people who are not particularly interested in her story. The performer may feel that a rather fast pace and dramatic changes of pace are necessary to keep the audience's attention. Pace is affected by the emotional involvement of the speaker and by the situation, as well as by the performer's interpretation of the mood or atmosphere of the selection. Performance style depends on a performer's individual interpretation of a text. Good criticism relates performance choices to interpretation. Be sure that your comments specifically relate to the particular interpretation and not just to the performance techniques employed.

Keep five primary guidelines in mind when participating in an evaluation session:

1. Be objective.
2. Be specific.
3. Be constructive.
4. Be encouraging.
5. Be flexible in response styles.

If you listen to a performance with an open mind, you are being objective and are not allowing prejudices involving either the performer or the selection to get in your way. An objective evaluation focuses on the performer's unique interpretation and not on what you would have done were you to perform that same selection. Objectivity, then, is an important guideline to follow during an evaluation session.

Objectivity is related to the second guideline: be specific. Our first response to most things is subjective: either we like something, or we do not like it. The reasons behind our positive or negative response normally come after some reflection. As you observe a performance, ask yourself *why* you liked or disliked something. What did the performer do that worked? If you believe that a certain moment did not work, be specific in citing the line or lines that made up that moment. If you think a gesture was too literal, for example, tell the performer why. Work at being as descriptive as possible during the evaluation session. Comments that lack specificity are not particularly helpful to the performer.

When you evaluate, work on being constructive in your criticism. Any critical comment can be tactfully worded so that it sounds like a suggestion rather than a censure. You can say, "Your arms just remained at your sides throughout the entire performance," or you can be constructive and say, "If you had gestured more often, I might have seen the character's excitement more easily." Constructive comments suggest ways that a performance can be improved; they do not just tell a performer what he or she did "wrong." It may take a bit more time to be constructive, but your reward will be a more beneficial and appreciated evaluation.

It is always easier to say what is wrong with something, and we often tend to be too critical when we evaluate. Although it is good to be critical, it helps the performer if you can say something positive as well. There is some good in every interpretation performance. Be sure to encourage performers to keep trying by telling them not only what was wrong, but also what was right and why. Sometimes interpreters work even harder if they know there is something they do well.

Our last suggestion is to be flexible in your use of response styles. In everyday living, we are often confronted with situations in which our opinions are required. According to David W. Johnson in an interpersonal communication text entitled *Reaching Out*,[1] five types of response styles are used 80 percent of the time: Evaluative, Interpretive, Supportive, Probing, and Understanding. Let us describe each of these response styles, substituting interpretation terminology for the sender/receiver orientation Johnson employs.

Evaluative

A response that indicates that the audience member has made a judgment of relative goodness, appropriateness, effectiveness, or rightness of the performer's presentation. The audience member has in some way implied what the performer might or should do.

Interpretive

A response that indicates the audience member's intent is to teach, to tell the performer what his or her problem means, how the performer should really feel about the situation. The audience member has either obviously or subtly implied how the performer might have interpreted the text differently.

Supportive

A response that indicates the audience member's intent is to reassure, to pacify, to reduce the performer's intensity of feeling. The audience member has in some way implied that the performer should feel good about his or her performance. Use the supportive response when you want to convince performers that they did better than they may have thought. The supportive response can also be used to encourage someone to keep trying or to help alleviate future performance anxiety.

Probing

A response that indicates the audience member's intent is to seek further information, provide further discussion along a certain line, or question the performer. The audience member has in some way implied that the performer might profitably develop or discuss a point further. Use the probing response when you need more information from the performer before giving any other type of response. If the selection was particularly difficult or complex, you may want to ask questions before offering any reactions. A performer usually appreciates the opportunity to answer questions about a presentation. (Performers enjoy asking questions, too. They often want to know how what they intended was received.)

Understanding

A response that indicates the audience member's intent is to try to determine whether the audience member understood the performer's interpretation, as much as it is possible to do so. The understanding response is very valuable, but is the least employed response. With this response you do not attempt to criticize—instead you describe what you saw and heard. When you use this response, you try to paraphrase what you think the performer's interpretation was before giving any other kind of response.

Let us look at an example of how each response style might be used during a critique of a performance from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Evaluative: While I thought your performance was good, I thought Willy needed to sound and look older, as he is over sixty years old.
Interpretive: I thought you needed to consider Willy's dependence on the past.
Supportive: I don't think you should feel bad about your performance. You certainly have shown improvement.
Probing: Why did Willy sit throughout the scene?
Understanding: What I saw was that you portrayed Willy as he saw himself and not as he really was.

The types of responses we normally give most often are the evaluative and the interpretive types—the kinds where we tell performers what they should have done or thought. Our general tendency, says David W. Johnson, is "to judge, evaluate, approve, or disapprove."[2] Although the evaluative and the interpretive types of responses are often necessary and useful, we should try to use all fives types of responses during an evaluation, depending on the situation and the performer. No one type of response is better than another, but a mixture of response styles can often produce the most complete kind of evaluation.

Specific Guidelines for Evaluation

The suggestions so far have been fairly general. Let us now discuss specific kinds of questions to ask if you are put in the position of leading or participating in a discussion.

Evaluating introductions

An evaluation should probably begin with a consideration of the introduction, if an introduction was given. Was it appropriate? Did it begin with an attention-getter? How well did it carve out the performer's interpretation? Did it offer enough or too much information? Did it set an appropriate mood? Was it delivered

extemporaneously? If the introduction was memorized, did the performer know it well enough to concentrate on communicating and not on remembering? Did it make the audience want to listen? If an introduction was not given, was it missed? What impact did the lack of an introduction have on the performance?

Evaluating prose fiction performances

If the performance is a prose fiction selection, concentrate on questions about the narrator and his or her point of view. What was the narrator's point of view? Was the attitude of the narrator clear? Did the narrator's attitude change? Was that reflected in performance? With whom did the narrator empathize? sympathize? Was this clear? For whom did the narrator feel antipathy? Was this attitude clear? Was it clear that characters were projected through the narrator's perspective? Who was the narrator's audience? What did the narrator want or need from this audience?

Evaluating drama performances

If the performance is from a play, begin with questions involving the delineation of the characters in the scene. Were the characters vocally, physically, and emotionally distinct? What motivated the characters? How were performance techniques employed to keep the characters distinct? Could the characters performed in this scene fit back into the context of the whole play? What were the characters' goals, obstacles, and strategies?

Evaluating poetry performances

If the performance is a poem, consider first the type of poem: lyric, dramatic, or narrative (see Chapter 8) and whether the performance techniques helped to make the type of poem clear. If the poem is lyric, discuss the performer's emotional responsiveness. If the poem is dramatic, was the character(s) clearly defined? What was the conflict and how was it expressed? If the poem is a narrative, was the story line clear? Were the narrator's point of view and attitude easy to follow? Consider also how rhythm, sound, and image contributed to the aesthetic whole of the performance.

You should also consider the interpreter's "sense of performance." Did the performer communicate a desire to perform? Did he or she communicate a sense of confidence and readiness? Did the performer make you feel comfortable? Did the performer make his or her choices clear?

Discussion leaders should try to obtain copies of the selections they will evaluate and read them ahead of time. In addition, they should probably reserve their opinions for the end of the discussion since their prior preparation might lead others to believe that they are more qualified and prepared to comment on the performances than is anyone else, and this could limit discussion. Discussion leaders should try to maximize audience participation by calling on people, if necessary, and asking specific questions. Discussion leaders should think of themselves as "leaders" and not "givers" of evaluations.

Your roles as audience and evaluator are complex ones. The suggestions in this chapter should improve your participation in both situations. Remember, the purpose of having an audience is to have someone with whom to share your interpretation. The purpose of evaluation is to improve interpretation and performance skills. Your participation is appreciated when you respond honestly and sincerely as an audience member and as an evaluator.

You are now ready to delve into the specifics of performing prose fiction, drama, and poetry. As you prepare selections for performance, refer to the first five chapters to review your appreciation and analysis of literature and your roles as performer, audience member, and evaluator.

SUMMARY

Your role as audience member is as important as your role as performer. As an audience member, your responsibilities are to listen, to constitute, to imagine, and to respond. In other words, you give the performer your undivided attention, you create your impression of the text, you remain open-minded, and you show your reactions to the performance by sending feedback to the performer. As an audience member, try to prevent external, internal, and semantic barriers from getting in the way of the performance and your appreciation of it.

As an evaluator, work to give the performer an honest, constructive appraisal of the performance. Be sure you are evaluating the interpretation and not just the performance techniques employed. A good evaluator is objective, specific, constructive, encouraging, and flexible in the use of response styles.

Notes

1. David W. Johnson, *Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), chapter 7, especially p. 125.
2. Ibid., p. 130.