

Dramaturgical Analysis

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A cast of characters, an audience, a script, dramatic action-- all these elements are traditionally associated with a theatrical event.. In dramaturgical analysis, such "theatrical dimensions" (Freie, 1997: 728) form the basis for helping researchers understand complex human interactions. As Manning (1996:262) describes it, dramaturgy provides a framework for the analysis of "selective presentations of symbols or of symbolic action having a persuasive effect."

The dramaturgical approach has been employed in a range of fields from sociology to media studies. Examples include: Darden and Marks's definition of boredom in sociology (1999); Manning's exploration of the role of the media, particularly television, in politics and interpersonal relations (1996); Jackson's discussion of interactive components in Theatre In Education (TIE) performances; Mount's analysis of *The Theatre of Politics* (1972) and Bisset and Edgley's work on *Life as Theater* (1990). What these approaches share is their use of the "metaphor of theatre" as a tool for unlocking "complex, multi-layered" events (Freie, 1997: 733). In addition to actual theatrical productions, these events, often described as performances, may focus on a traditional "text" such as a story, poem or novel; a media event such as a film or television program; or the interactions of everyday life. Theoretically, the dramaturgical approach fits comfortably within the perspective of symbolic interactionism with its focus on "human communication and its consequences, " which includes the "use of symbols, especially complex and highly abstract ones"(Maines, 1997: 1).

My intention is to use as a case study for demonstrating this approach a largely playbuilt environmental children's theatre piece entitled, , *Sense and Sustainability: A Fable for Our Times*, which was performed for primary school children, K-6, in September of 2000.

Produced by the Centre for Research and Education in the Arts at UTS, the plot line of the script focused on two children, Meg and Adam, who helped Mother Earth regain her failing health by working with others to clean up the environment. To do this they had to overcome the natural disasters of Slick, Smog, and Sludge. In this race against time, Mother Earth herself holds the key. As the children learn to listen to her, they discover the secret of how to transform their world.

Drawing inspiration from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1974), I will focus on one dramaturgical element, framing, as it occurs within this theatrical event. My aim is to reveal the variety of frames within this piece and how these contribute to the multiplicity of meanings which an audience may take with them from an event as deceptively straightforward as the performance of a children's play.

Within this analysis, my positioning is as dramaturge. This designation, which is one given to the key person (in addition to the director) who is responsible in a production for "script

analysis and interpretation" (Goldberg, 1974: 190), also works well in the research sense . My position is privileged because I worked with the script through all the stages of its development-- from the original brainstorming sessions with actors, through the improvisation and rehearsal stages, to the final 50 minute production which was performed for children. During this seven month period, I monitored the developing production by means of interactions with the cast and a student director, and by taking photographs and keeping videotape records. From these, I constructed "close readings and thick descriptions" (Manning, 1996: 262) which were useful in this analysis.

THE FRAME:

A frame functions as a filter which emphasises certain elements, bringing them into focus while de-emphasising others. With regard to framing in the dramaturgical context, Jackson, commenting on Goffman's original concept of the "theatrical frame," emphasises that within a theatrical event there may be "more than ...one frame..." operating. In fact, frames acting as "sign-systems" may shift "from moment to moment" during the course of the play (1997:54). With this in mind, I analysed the brainstorming and rehearsal notes and the script and the performance video to identify the range of frames operating during the development and performance of *Sense and Sustainability: A Fable for Our Times*.

This discussion focuses on the four main types of frame which I discovered and how analysis using these led to useful insights. These frames are: the ideological, relating to underlying themes and their presentation within the script; the structural, relating to the organisation of these ideas into a plot sequence; the visual, relating to the images presented to the audience during the playing out of these ideas on the stage; and the transactional relating to the implicit agreement between actors and audience and how this was made explicit during the theatrical performance. Each type of frame will be discussed in turn.

The Ideological Frame:

Using the ideological frame, two key questions relating to the play's environmental stance came into focus. They were: Who has the power to deal with environmental issues? and How can this best be done? My retrospective analysis showed that these questions were central throughout the development process, and I now see that finding satisfactory answers to them was crucial to the play's successful development. For example, in the initial brainstorming workshops, students created three appealing superheroes named Renew, Recycle, and Regenerate, who flew from place to place intervening in environmental situations by admonishing wrongdoers and then modelling correct behaviour (e.g. Put your rubbish in the bin, not on the ground).

However, in the end, we became uncomfortable with this interventionist approach because in it power resided with super-humans, with problems being resolved in a *deus exmachina* fashion. Instead we needed an approach which gave decision making power to the human characters in the script. For this reason, two children, Meg and Adam, who go to school, bicker, and have everyday problems much like the children in the audience, were developed. They became the means by which others, including the adult characters, such as their Mother and the bin collector, became aware of environmental issues. We regarded this as a much stronger model for influencing audience behaviour.

This pivotal question of "Who has power" was intensified for young audiences by personifying the non-human aspects of the environment. The resulting conflicts between characters on the stage, then, represented actual environmental issues. The aim of such

dramatisation was to help children identify more closely with the issues involved. The effectiveness of personification in doing this was discovered early in the workshop sessions when one group created the character of an unhealthy Mother Earth diagnosed with symptoms of global warming and clogged arteries. She became the prototype for the Mother Earth of the play, a bag lady who roams the high-rise city where her forests once grew, seeking someone to help her regain her health. The bag she carries contains the keys to her revival: a shell, a child's doll, and a seedling-but she cannot do it alone. Pitted against her are ecological disasters, personified as the characters-Slick, Sludge, and Smog. The main conflict in the show comes from the relationships which develop between these elements. This is consistent with the "current ecological vision" of thinking about the world--:"not as separated objects but as sets of relationships" (Suzuki, 1997:198).

The play answers the second question, namely, how can we best deal with ecological issues, by emphasising the ideas of transformation and working together. In short, in the climax of the play, Mother Earth uses human help and technology to bring about transformation.

The message revealed here is that technology need not be the enemy, but rather it can serve an essential function when put to service in the transformation process. This ideological view is played out in performance through the introduction of a regenerator, a processing machine which purifies Smog, refines Slick and makes Sludge bio-degradable. This machine, as portrayed on the stage, is made by human actors who become parts of the machine working together to bring about change. This visually re-enforces the messages of human-machine interaction and the essential need for everything to work together in order to achieve positive outcomes. Transformation is also inherent in the final moment of the play as Mother Earth asks all her human helpers to plant the seedlings which she provides from her bag. Planting these transforms the inner city environment.

The Structural Frame:

Structurally, story, in the form of myth and folktale, provided the organisational frame for these ideas within the script. Traditional tales were chosen to carry the plot elements because they are one means by which significant cultural ideas have been passed down from one generation to the next (Finnegan, 1992:7). The spine of the script was based on four folktales, inter-woven to emphasise environmental themes. Coherence and continuity were maintained within this structure by having the child characters journey in and out of these four story frames, as they seek the key to restoring Mother Earth's failing health.

Read sequentially, the first of these stories was the well-known folktale known in the Norwegian variant as *The Magic Fish*. The plot was adapted to tell the story of a fisher couple who demand too much from the sea, deplete its resources, and, as a result, lose everything. After the magic fish changes their fine castle back to their original humble hut, the final lines of the scene emphasise what they have learned:

Fisherwife: Now we're back to where we were before.

Fisherman: No, it's worse. For now we know the magic we have lost.

The nursery tale of the *Three Little Pigs* provided the second story frame. In this environmental version, the wolf was simultaneously enacted by the three actors who played the roles of Smog, Slick and Sludge, bringing the metaphor of "The wolf at the door" to life. Acting in unison, they knocked on each pig's door, huffed and puffed, and were eventually defeated by the three pigs working together to make their home-- their world-- a better place.

A frame within a frame was at work in this scene as the child characters read the story together with their Mother as it was being enacted on the stage.

The third story frame was provided by a native American traditional tale about a girl who saved her people during the drought by giving up what she most loved, her doll. In this play, the character, Meg, breaks the story frame by walking into it and assuming the role of the girl in the story. She intervenes to affect the outcome, making the point that children can take on important roles in saving the environment. The doll itself is a metaphor for the reciprocity which is needed between humans and the earth. As Mother Earth gives the doll to Meg she tells her that it was first given to her by the girl in the story she is telling. In turn, Meg eventually returns the doll to Mother Earth.

The fourth story frame, the old Greek myth of *Pandora's Box*, took on new meaning in this play as Pandora, the city's bin collector, empties a waste bin after Meg and Adam advise her not to do so. As a result, Smog, Slick, and Sludge escape from the container where Meg and Adam have confined them. When the children protest, Pandora consoles them, saying that they are the hope of the future, not the no-hopers who have just escaped from the bin. This dialogue directly re-enforces the answer to the "Who has power" question raised in the ideological frame. It is the children. Furthermore, the dramatisation of this scene shows that caring for the environment is not just a one-off activity. Constant effort is needed to contain environmental disasters.

Read together, these tales, as scenes within the script, reveal the values of awareness, teamwork, focused action, and vigilance when it comes to taking care of the environment. However, individually, each story as a scene can also be read as an exemplar or a counterpoint to other existing stories outside the frame of the play. A mirror as a type of frame then becomes a useful analogy to use when reflecting on the script's inter-textual resonances. For example: *The Three Little Pigs* in this script is a fable with a lesson which gains meaning because it mirrors for most children in the audience the nursery story they already know. On the other hand, although most audience members will not know the native American story of *The Little Girl and Her Doll*, many will be familiar with religious texts (such as John 3:16-For God so loved the world) where the sacrifice of one saves the lives of others.

The linking story frame in the play revolves around the children, Meg and Adam, who lose their house key and cannot get back inside their home. Mother Earth, the bag lady, helps them find it. On the mythic level, this loss mirrors humanity's realisation that it has lost the key to its own survival unless there is a return to Mother Earth. On another level, this overriding story, physically played out on the stage, is an analogue for the archetypal Adam and Eve story. The lesson is clear: Not doing the right thing, they were eternally barred from the garden. This parallel is re-enforced in the children's theatre script by naming one of the children Adam. These resonances with stories outside the play add depth to the script because the audience may consciously or unconsciously draw on them to enrich their own understanding of the current production.

I have found that using a structural frame also helps uncover the unexpected. When I juxtaposed the opening and closing scenes against one another, I found an unexpected reversal. One usually expects a play to start at the beginning and progress to the end. However, the opening scene of this play shows the end of life for the forest as the developers move in and chop down the trees, while the final scene shows a new beginning as characters unite in planting seedlings. The progress of the play between these two scenes then can be read as a rewind of the action as the child characters step back and take time to listen to Mother Earth and to discover the environmental keys which they will

use to move forward in preserving the environment. Another way of expressing this is that this the structure consists of a problem-solution pattern.

Within the structural frame, another useful device was reading the play as a cycle. The opening scene and first folktale show humans depleting the environment both on land and at sea. The second folktale re-enforces the need to work together to overcome the natural disasters brought about by human neglect. The third folktale emphasises that this will take sacrifice and commitment, while the fourth recognises there is hope, but cautions constant vigilance. If vigilance fails, the whole cycle will need to start again.

THE VISUAL FRAME

Central to the enactment of the play was the visual frame of the proscenium arch which marked the upper, lower and side boundaries of the stage. This frame served to contain the action, except on two notable occasions—once when Meg walked down in front of the audience and looked back to the action on the stage, and then when Slick, Smog, and Sludge were chased through the audience.

The space within this stage frame was visually divided in several ways. First, there was a stand alone door frame which separated areas inside the house, where Meg and Adam lived with their Mother, from those outside. Within the play, the security inside the house was often contrasted with the besieged environment outside, where Smog hung around, Slick clogged the waterways, and Sludge ruined the land.

Key icons—that is, images that were what they represented (Esslin, 1987:43)—formed an essential part of the visual frame. One such image was the container. For example, throughout most of the play an over-size waste bin was placed centre stage. By this visual means, associations with verbal environmental slogans, such as, "Do the right thing" and "Recycle your rubbish", were there for the audience to make.

Mother Earth's bag is also an important container. In contrast to the waste bin which holds rubbish, including at one point— Slick, Smog and Sludge, Mother Earth's bag contains her memories. These she brings out to help others recall their responsibilities toward the earth. These two containers visually form a meaningful counterpoint—Mother Earth takes her treasures out of the container one by one, while the child characters put waste into the container piece by piece.

The image of Mother is also emphasised in the play. There are two: Mother Earth and Adam and Meg's Mother. However, using the visual frame, it was revealed that the relationship between these two within the play is unclear. In fact, their actions are at times counterproductive, for example, when Mother Earth tries to keep the children's mother, a land developer, from cutting down trees. Visual frame analysis revealed the inconsistencies in their behaviour toward each other which may give mixed messages to the audience.

Finally, green was an important colour visually and was integrated into the costuming, referred to in the script, and used in painting the set. Mother Earth wore green; Slick, Smog and Sludge stated they "hated" green; and Meg and Adam's house was a raised platform painted green with large yellow and green sun-flowers hung from its lattice work.

Using the visual frame was particularly useful in determining whether these production elements seen by the audience supported the ideological and structural frames as found in the script. As has been pointed out, at least one major discrepancy was found.

THE TRANSACTIONAL FRAME

The performance of a play for an audience involves an unstated agreement between the actors and the spectators to suspend disbelief. Actors play their assigned roles as do members of the audience. Explicit signals and more implicit signs cue the audience as to their expected responses. For example, asides and direct questioning often elicit verbal responses from the audience such as confirming, disconfirming, cautioning, and advising. Planned and spontaneous audience participation are important parts of this transaction.

This play did have some direct interactions, such as when the bin collector, Pandora, asked the audience's advice about whether to let Slick, Smog and Sludge out of the waste

bin, and also when they were chased through the audience. However, a transactional frame analysis of this production revealed that direct interaction was minimal. For a play which is trying to persuade children to take action toward the environment, it does not encourage much overt action from the audience in terms of verbalising their commitment or demonstrating their action. For this reason, next year *Sense and Sustainability: A Fable for Our Times* will be transactionally reframed as an audience participation piece which will be removed from the proscenium arch stage which constrains it and enacted in a large hall in the round. Direct participation by children, such as modelling the cleaning up of the environment and planting trees, will be built into the action. This should dramatically improve the interactive elements of the play-making the transactions between the actors and the audience relating to the ideas in the script more active and consistent with the play's purpose of persuading children to become personally involved in environmental issues.

CONCLUSION

Methodologically, this paper focused on dramaturgical analysis, in particular, the element of framing within a theatrical event. This case study demonstrated how framing can be used to analyse a production for children in order to demonstrate the many levels at work in this complex sign-symbol event.

Four types of frame were identified: The ideological frame useful in identifying central ideas and themes; the structural frame useful in identifying organisational patterns, such as reversed action, problem-solving or cycles; the visual frame useful in identifying key production elements seen by an audience which may shape their understandings of the performance; and the transactional frame which identified the nature of the interactions between actors and the audience which occurred during the performance.

In conclusion, the importance of dramaturgical analysis as a method is that it can be used both as a critical tool in developing or critiquing plays or as a diagnostic tool for the dramaturge in clarifying the underlying ideological messages; discovering what is working and what is not in the script or performance; and revealing inconsistencies within and among the different frames which may detract from the total coherence and consistency of the production.

There is an old adage that, "The frame makes the picture." This analysis shows that, at the very least, the use of frames helps the researcher focus attention on related elements within the performance of a theatrical event as a prelude to more in-depth analysis.

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