A Theory of Evaluating Drama and Theatre

William J. Free*

During the past two decades, the theory of dramatic structure and the vocabulary for describing both the playscript and its performance have expanded enormously.[1] Unfortunately, understanding the evaluative judgment of playscript and performance has not kept pace. In fact, the seventies witnessed a growing hostility to the idea of judgment, especially if applied to the performer. To one theatre scholar, this hostility is a product of an emphasis on process rather than product in educational and by extension professional theatre (Motter 5-7). But an equally plausible and perhaps more basic cause is a lack of understanding of what aesthetic judgment involves, especially when applied to the total dramatic/theatrical experience.

Particularly, critics who write from the viewpoint of performance theory and those who write from literary aesthetics appear to have found little or no common ground. Many performance-oriented critics either ignore evaluative processes altogether, or, like J. L. Styan, center the evaluative process in only one aspect of the total theatre experience.

Styan insists that value judgment in drama must be centered on individual plays in interaction with individual audiences. In contending that "a playgoer's satisfaction will reflect the kind and quality of the imaginative life he is living" and that "if the play illuminates any side of his life which was dim before . . . then he can say that there is quality in the interest stimulated" (1963, 269), Styan describes a valid and important aspect of theatre judgment, but only one limited and subjective aspect. Furthermore, he centers his attention on the flow of sensations between audience and performer without attempting to describe a systematic field of judgment structuring those sensations.

On the other hand, phenomenological critics like Roman Ingarden recognize the hierarchal complexities of literary experience but do not extend

*William J. Free teaches modern drama and theory in the University of Georgia English Department. An earlier version of this paper won the American Theatre Association's Criticism and Theory Competition in 1982.

that recognition to the added complexity of performance. To Ingarden the cognition of the literary text is largely a matter of internal consciousness rather than external perception (414-16). Although he does recognize that different modes of value perception are at work on different modes of literary cognition, and that criticism must somehow take account of those different levels, his insistence on consistency and his weakness in dealing with external performance fail to extend our understanding of evaluating the playscript or performance either separately or in unity.

A second problem involves verifying value judgments. To some theorists, Ingarden among them, judgment implies the existence of rules and meta-rules by which critics can verify the accuracy of their predications of value. To them, when a critic says "This is a good play," he should be able to support his contention by reference to relevant and (nearly) universally accepted rules and be able to validate the relevance of his rules by reference to meta-rules on a higher level of abstraction.

We can find a clear example of this process in Rolf Fjelde's assignment of Ibsen's work to the status of "masterpiece." Fjelde insists that "a bonafide masterpiece ought to display . . . range, depth, and urgency, in varying, but collectively sufficient degrees," (584) and goes on to argue that Ibsen's plays satisfy those criteria. He seems to take the criteria, however, to be self-evident, validated by the history of their use. Further, these values seem to be capable of automatic transference into any potential performance of an Ibsen play. Most directors of Ibsen would probably find this a highly problematic concept. Such judgment seems to lie outside the everyday experience of creating a performance.

Others consider judgmental statements in the arts as versions of what Joseph Margolis calls "appreciations" (223-25). To them value predications are validated not by logic but by persuasion; they are not absolute, they are plausible. The critic can persuade us of the plausbility of his appreciation of a play by connecting his judgment convincingly to the reality of the performance or playscript under consideration. If his description is an inadequate accounting of our experience with the play or if it is irrelevant (such as John Simon's statement in a review of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that black actors must never be cast in some roles, which is irrelevant because it does assume a universally applicable rule) his statements carry no force. Styan's insistence on the playgoer's satisfaction as the grounding of theatre value is just such an appreciation, for it states that the play derives its value from its making life more plausible to the playgoer, an argument much more forceful than a rules-based judgment.

The above is a brief and selective sampling of what is a complex and extensive problem. But from it we can derive several premises guiding any comprehensive theory of evaluating theatre art.

First, we must recognize that our experience of playscript and performance, alone or jointly, occurs on several discrete levels of consciousness, each of which functions in unity with the other.

Secondly, a single vocabulary cannot be relevant on all levels. The same vocabulary relevant to the structure of a playscript will not function to describe the actor's, director's, and designer's contribution to the performance.

Thirdly, our present appreciation of a performance during the act of witnessing and our later continuing the evaluation through memory must be dealt with on different terms and on the different structural and semiotic levels involved.

Fourthly, we must recognize that some evaluations are intentional acts of consciousness and some are automatic responses grounded in our immediate involvement with what we are watching or reading. A single vocabulary cannot describe and validate judgments made both intentionally and unintentionally.

II

The remainder of this paper offers not a solution to these problems but a heuristic model that attempts to separate four levels of appreciation and the acts of judgment relevant to each. The structure of the model derives from the German phenomenologist Max Scheler. In his *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values* Scheler postulates a four-part stratification of our emotional life, each with its own mode of value. His four strata are not necessarily equivalent to the levels of response to theatre, but the two parallel in stimulating ways. By exploring these parallels we can perhaps move in the direction of a comprehensive theory of evaluating drama and theatre.

Scheler designates his four levels as (1) sensory feeling, (2) vital feeling, (3) psychic feeling, and (4) spiritual feeling. Each stratum has its individual definition and can stand independent of the others, yet the strata interact within the unified experience of the person. Similarly, we respond to the theatre on different levels of our emotional and psychological beings and at different times. Scheler's four levels can help us clearly separate these responses.

In borrowing Scheler's categories I am not committing my remarks to the phenomenological method. Rather I am attempting to describe a connection between the flow of sensations from the performance text or of verbal codes from the dramatic text and the various acts of judgment within the viewer/reader. I am further trying to suggest the degree to which these four levels of judgment can be discrete on the one hand and united on the other.

I. Sensory Feeling

Scheler's definition of sensory feeling contains two terms that are particularly relevant to the theatre experience. Sensory feeling is never without an object, and it is exclusively a phenomenon of the present moment.

By the first of these, Scheler means that sensory experience cannot be intentionally created by an act of imagination but must be actually present to the senses. Although hallucinations resembling sensory experience can be stimulated (by drugs, for example), they differ from sensory experience in two ways. First, they are not true sensory experiences but only semblances. Second, although taking the drug is an intentional act, the drug taker cannot control the nature of his hallucinations. By the second term, Scheler means that sensory experience cannot be derived from memory, nor does it have reference to anything before of after the immediate experience. It occurs in only one temporal dimension, which is now.

Sensory feeling accompanies our immediate perception of dramatic performance. The flow of visual and aural stimuli from the stage is present to our senses and cannot be duplicated at another time. It is either pleasant or unpleasant, value qualities Scheler attributes to the senses.

This experience cannot be duplicated by reading a playscript because the immediate sensory content of literature is minimal. The words of the playscript are present to the reader only through an intentional act of his imagination, which occurs on a level of experience other than the sensory and which more nearly resembles controlled hallucination than true sensory experience. This fact forms the basic distinction between the script as literature and as performed theatre.[2]

Our evaluation of performance on the sensory level is automatic and unintentional. We can willfully refuse to perceive the sight and sound from the stage; we can look around and daydream, talk to our companion, or even leave the theatre. But if we act in good faith, we become receptors of the sensory stimuli before us. In this case, if our attention wanders because the experience is not pleasant, we have made an automatic and unintentional value judgment. To put it another way, we have intended to be pleased, but the stimuli from the stage have countered our intention. This judgment is subject to no rules or conditions other than our presence in the theatre. It is the basis of our subsequent judgments even though we cannot articulate it except as a wandering of the attention or by whispering to our neighbor, "This is dull."

If we say "This is dull" after the fact of witnessing the performance we have moved to a different, past tense, level of experience. We cannot return to the original sensory experience for verifications since every new performance is a new stimulus both to the actor and the audience. Additionally, a sensory judgment is unarguable. Telling someone who was bored that he should not have been is pointless since no principles exist on which to base such an argument except the moment of his boredom. Nor does his boredom predicate boredom for anyone else. We may argue with his judgments on all other levels, but not on the level of sensory feeling.

2. Vital Feeling

Vital feeling Scheler defines as the unitary feeling of life in which the various sensory feelings are given wholeness and extension. As such it is the vaguest of his concepts and the most difficult to express adequately.

Theatre critics and artists instinctively know when a performance is "alive" or "dead" but lack a fully adequate critical vocabulary for describing those conditions. Such words as *energy, rhythm,* and Stanislavski's *communion* try to articulate the performer's bringing into unity and life the separate sensory moments of the play, but a certain mysticism still surrounds such terms. Performing artists deal with practical techniques for producing vital feeling, but by and large have been less interested in articulating theories about them. Literary critics ignore them altogether.

Audiences sense that vitality comes from the skill of the performer. But this realization raises as many problems as it solves. Bernard Beckerman, for

example, distinguishes between the transparent performance, where the spectator sees through the actor's skill to the reality beneath, and opaque performance, where the spectator's pleasure comes to a large extent from perceiving that skill (31-32). But neither of these explanations accounts for the vitality of the performance. Beckerman here distiguishes between naturalistic and "alienated" theatre, but does not account for the fact that either of these can be "dead" or "alive" to the audience.

Futhermore, the actor's skill cannot be reduced to the technical accuracy with which he articulates language and movement. We have all witnessed performances that were technically accurate but lifeless. Most directors would probably agree that the chronological progress of rehearsing a play moves from chaos to technical competency to vitality. And anyone who has been involved in theatre knows that vitality is fragile: it is here tonight, gone tomorrow. The problem is not its existence but the inadequacy of our vocabulary to describe its experience.

If we cannot satisfactorily define vitality, we can at least locate it as a separate stratum of theatre experience. The differences between performance and literature are again relevant here. Vitality in the playscript is present as a potentiality rather than an actuality. The reader can discover the potentials for theatrical rhythm within the script, but he cannot actualize these potentials in sensory experience. Only the artists—actors, directors, designers, lighting and sound technicians—can actualize (or fail to actualize) the potential vitality of the script. The reader of the script can judge its vitality only hypothetically and should be aware of the fact that his/her judgment is problematic. Failure to be aware of this limitation accounts for such statements as Hazlett's that Shakespeare cannot be adequately performed.

Although the vitality of the play is not identical to its sensory level, it is dependent on sensory response to the extent that a performance which loses our attention cannot have vitality for us no matter how much potential is in its script. Potential vitality must be realized in performance in order to exist for us. The skill of the performer unifies potential vitality and sensory pleasure, energy and form, the sense of life and the fictions of the stage.

When describing the intentionality of the judgment of vital feeling we enter a gray zone. We perceive the vitality of a play automatically as we perceive its sensory value, but our articulation of that value is an intentional act which occurs after the conclusion of the experience. If we attempt to articulate the rhythm or energy of a performance during our experience of it, we lose a degree of attention, which is self-defeating. A description of a play's vitality involves an intentional act of reference to the sensory experience of the performance, and this is possible only after the fact. Such a description is an appreciation in the sense defined above. It operates somewhere between the boundaries of sensory impression and form, between life and fiction.

3. Psychic Feeling

Psychic feeling involves the perception of meaningful forms in the flow of vital sensations. It is intellectual, intentional, and after-the-fact of experience. Psychic judgment occurs in reference to our perceiving the design of the work:

that is, to the organization of its semiotic materials irrespective of the vitality, real or potential, which it may or may not have as performance.

The point of reference for this judgment is the total sense accumulated in our culture of the way dramatic works are structured. This sense is contained in the history of dramatic theory and practice available to us. None of these concepts provides rules which dictate the presence or absence of value, but all are culturally available to us as interpretive vocabularies by which the critic can justify his predication of value to the design of the work. The critic's choice of vocabulary on this level implies an interpretation of the work, just as the director's and actor's artistic choices imply an interpretation of design which guides the movement of their performance.

If we assume that the predication of aesthetic value to artworks implies the presence of a coherent design, several conclusions follow.

First, verifying the presence of a design in a particular play involves an intentional act of describing the play in reference to design features described in the history of dramatic theory and in theatre history. We may experience design features below the treshold of consciousness, but we can describe them only intentionally by raising them from what Freud calls "preconsciouness" into consciousness.

Second, the verification of the predication of value depends on the critic's or director's ability to persuade (one in the language of criticism, the other in the semiotics of performance) his reader/audience of the coherence of this interpretation of the design.

Therefore, third, there are as many potential interpretations of the design of a given play as critics/directors can satisfactorily verify as plausible. If we assume that our total experience with the formal design of plays is a part of our preconscious knowledge (or to shift from Freud to Kant, part of the schema by which our imaginations order the sensory experience which we are receiving from the stage or the page), the number of formal designs we can perceive is limited only by the number of possibilities contained in that body of preconscious material.

Four, it is valid, consequently, to think of criticism and performance as creatively open-ended without abandoning the concept of aesthetic judgment. Playwrights and other theatre artists may discover new modes of design which they articulate through their medium and which criticism subsequently describes in its vocabulary. As dramatic criticism and practice respond to the flow of human history, new possibilities arise for literary and theatre critics and for theatre artists in their quest for more satisfying concepts of design in plays. The twentieth century has witnessed an enormous expansion of these possiblities, for example, through the theoretical and practical work of people like Artaud and Brecht.

4. Spiritual Feeling

The idea of spiritual values moves the play into engagement with the world at large. Like psychic values, spiritual values imply intentional interpretation of the the play verified by relation to idea and structures outside the play and its immediate performance. Perhaps I can clarify this point by two references.

The difference between interpretation of design and the attributing of spiritual value resembles Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between "commentary," "which sticks close to a given text [or performance] and elucidates its individual elements," and "interpretation," "which attempts an integrated reading of a given work by translating the set [of individual elements] into another set of terms . . . " (10). This act of translation refers to what Eugenio Montale calls the "second life" of an artwork (20-24). This second life, which Montale describes as "its entire flowing back into the very life from which art itself took first nourishment" (22), refers to the total absorption of work of art into the life of an individual or a culture where it serves as a point of reference for organizing and enriching life, a process very like that cited from Styan at the beginning of this paper.

Psychic and spiritual values seem ambiguous to some degree, but on close examination we can see that the ambiguity is more apparent than real. Psychic values lie inside, spiritual values outside, the accumulated cultural history of the art of theatre. The director or actor may interpret the design of a play from the standpoint of spiritual values, such as Olivier's playing Hamlet as having an Oedipus complex. But in doing so, he is appropriating from Freudian psychology designs which are not inherent to drama *per se* and layering them over (or integrating them within) the structural/functional implications of Shakespeare's playscript. To a large extent the nature of "concept productions" is that the artist finds (or forces) spiritual values on the design of the play in order to extend or even force its second life.[3] Such a method differs sharply from using the culturally accumulated theory of dramatic design to understand the designs and rhythms inherent in the text. Ascribing psychic and spiritual values to a play are both interpretative acts, but they approach the play from different directions.

The distinction of four levels of dramatic/theatrical experience explains why a farce or melodrama may satisfy our attention, may be judged vital in performance and of adequate design, but may not enter the life of our culture as do *King Lear, Phaedra,* or *The Cherry Orchard.* The farce and melodrama may even be revived and continue to satisfy us by their vitality, but they do not linger in the long-term memory of our culture. They have no true second life.

These distinctions also help account for the lack of understanding between theatre and literary critics. Literary critics tend to place higher value on spiritual values and theatre critics on vitality and design. If both groups acknowledge that value exists on several levels in a given play, many critical disagreements could be shown to be not about a play itself but about the priority of values.

III

Although Scheler's stratification model does not provide an answer to the question of evaluating theatre art, it does pinpoint several areas where greater understanding and more adequate critical vocabulary are needed. It also suggests a number of premises for dealing with them. To illustrate, I will conclude by sketching three.

Premise 1. Value in drama is cumulative as we move through the strata of evaluation. The more value ascribable to a play on the more levels, the greater its ultimate value. We have all experienced performances which hold our attention, have a high degree of vitality, but which are poorly designed and/or have little or no second life. Such are especially common in a mass medium like television. To say that a performance of this sort is valueless is a contradiction of fact. To praise it excessively is absurd.

Premise 2. Fidelity to the values of the written playscript (although not necessarily slavish adherence to its literal fact) is a necessary part of the value of the total theatre art. Part of the value of a given performance of a dramatic text comes from the relationship of sensory and vital values, both of which exist in performance, and psychic and spiritual values which exist both inside and outside performance. They exist in reading the playscript as well as in witnessing its performance. Performing the script unifies and synthesizes these various levels of value. Imbalance on either side weakens the potential value of the performance to the audience. A performance can be made so lively that the design and significance of the script are lost; a script can be so slavishly recreated that it is lifeless. Both acts obviously weaken the potential value of the experience.

Suppose two performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* productions A and B. Both satisfy the demand for vitality and attention. But on reflection we decide that A reduces the potentials of the text's design and "second life" to something relatively more trivial than does B. We can therefore judge production B artistically superior, although we cannot judge A as being without merit. Both reviewers and academic critics should be more aware of this distinction, for it can serve to eliminate much of the misunderstanding and hostility dividing artists and critics.

Premise 3. Judgment cannot be suspended at any point in the total theatre experience, but different kinds of judgment function at different points in the experience.

Richard Hornby insists that the artist must occasionally suspend judgment and consider the script on which he works as potentially perfect. "Only then," he contends, "will he be likely to find any dynamic structures beneath the surface, because structures must take into account the *entire* script rather than just those parts one finds immediately attractive" (36). What I think Hornby means is that the artist must suspend spiritual judgment. We must assume that any performer wants to give the most vital and pleasing performance possible. From that viewpoint, any script, or even no script, is potentially perfect, since all are capable of generating high value on the sensory and vital levels. The pre-rehearsal determination of the performance implications of any playscript as well as the process of trial and error which accompanies any good preparation of a performance while in rehearsal is constantly a process of selecting the better over the weaker potentials on these value levels. The audience's and the critic's evaluations of the production, if informed and accurate, should describe the values discovered in the total dramatic experience ranging from the playwright's study to the rehearsal hall to the moment of performance. Such clear-headed understanding of the methods and importance of evaluation on all levels might help stop artist and critic from

being adversaries and restore critical evaluation to its true place in the total theatre experience.

University of Georgia

Notes

1. The most prominent works in this development are: Jackson G. Barry, *Dramatic Structure* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1970); Bernard Beckerman, *Dynamics of Drama* (New York: Knopf, 1970); Roger Gross, *Understanding Playscripts* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green UP, 1974); Richard Hornby, *Script Into Performance* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1977); J. L. Styan, *The Elements of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963); and *Drama, Stage, and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975). My debt to all these works is extensive.

2. Kant distinguishes clearly between the external imagery available to the senses through performance in arts such as music, dance, and acting and the internal imagery which the subjective imagination must supply through the mediation of signs and symbols. See *Critique of Judgment,* trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1966) 61. Ingarden departs from Kant in seeming to think that reading a play occurs in the same form of present tense as seeing a performance. See *Cognition* 136-37. But performance is materially different from reading in that both direct stimulation to the senses and the mediated imagery of language are simultaneously present. Furthermore, the reader can repeat his reading; the audience cannot repeat its witnessing. (This is not to say that any two readings are identical any more than any two witnessings.) As reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish point out, second readings occur in the context of a different set of expectations from first readings. But this difference lodges solely in the reader; the text remains the same. In performance both the text and the audience's horizons of expectation shift—greatly from production to production (say a minimalist warehouse production of *Hamlet* as opposed to the Royal Shakespeare Company's mainstage production) and subtly from performance to performance of the same production. What director hasn't been startled to hear lines he's never heard before or mumbled to himself, "What's he doing over there?" The reader's dramatic text remains the same; the performance text is constantly shifting.

3. David Cole, *The Theatrical Event* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1975) 152-53, attacks concept productions for depriving the audience of an open experience of the play by forcing an interpretive pattern on the play which interferes with the audience's reaction to the "strangeness" of the play. My contention here is that concept productions are acceptable if they can be persuasively justified from the play.

Works Cited

Beckerman, Bernard. *Dynamics of Drama.* New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970.

Fjelde, Rolf. "What Makes a Masterpiece? Ibsen and the Western World." *Modern Drama* 28 (1985): 581-590.

Hornby, Richard. *Script Into Performance.* Austin: U of Texas P, 1977.

Ingarden, Roman. *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art.* trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973.

Margolis, Joseph. *Art and Philosophy.* Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980.

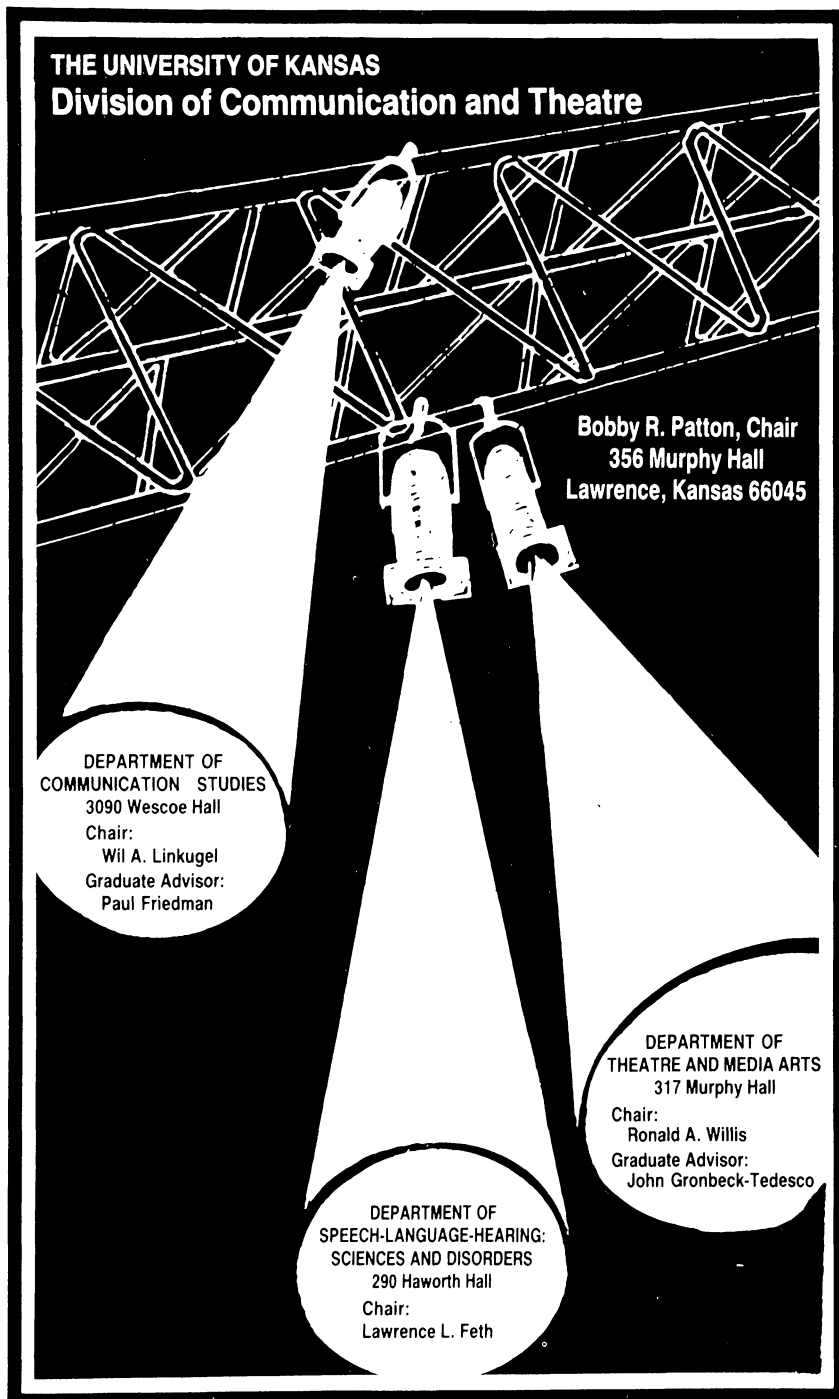
Montale, Eugenio. *The Second Life of Art.* New York: The Ecco Press, 1982.

Motter, Charlotte Kay. "I Don't Quite Remember," *Theatre News* 13.1 (1981): 5-7.

Scheler, Max. *Formalism in Ethics and Non-formal Ethics of Values.* trans. Manfred S. Frings and Roger L. Funk. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973.

Styan, J. L. *The Elements of Drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1963.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose.* trans. Richard Howard. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977.


THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS
Division of Communication and Theatre
Bobby R. Patton, Chair
356 Murphy Hall
Lawrence, Kansas 66045
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES
3090 Wescoe Hall
Chair:
Wil A. Linkugel
Graduate Advisor:
Paul Friedman
DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE AND MEDIA ARTS
317 Murphy Hall
Chair:
Ronald A. Willis
Graduate Advisor:
John Gronbeck-Tedesco
DEPARTMENT OF SPEECH-LANGUAGE-HEARING: SCIENCES AND DISORDERS
290 Haworth Hall
Chair:
Lawrence L. Feth