

The Compiled Script:
An Inspirational Experience?

Debra A. Freeman
ID 499--Honors Thesis
May 16, 1979
Advisor--Dr. Judy Yordon

An article for
Communication Education



Sp 611
-1) 10-15
20
24
20

As anyone who has ever tried to adapt a Readers Theatre script knows "to compose is not an inspirational experience."¹ The task of composition becomes easier if one has a workable format which he or she may use as a guideline. Most importantly, one needs to remember that in any Readers Theatre script the adapter should always "feature the text."

Readers Theatre scripts can be categorized into at least three general groups: a single work script that has been adapted to performance length (Paradise Lost--Milton); a multiple work program which features the literature of a particular author ("An Evening with Robert Frost"), a particular genre ("Sonnets by Contemporary Female Writers"), or particular idea ("Love-- a Collection of Readings by Frost, Dickinson, and Shakespeare"); and the compiled or distilled script that utilizes literature from all genres and many different authors unified by a theme. The first two types of programs mentioned, the single and multiple work scripts, have been discussed in several articles and textbooks,² but comparatively less has been written about the compiled script. It is this writer's intent, therefore, to concentrate on this particular type of Readers Theatre script in order to point out its advantages and disadvantages, discuss the necessity of deciding on a director's concept or purpose, offer ideas on picking a theme, suggest sources from which to gather materials, and propose some feasible methods of structure

and composition. It is hoped that this article will provide a springboard for those who may attempt a compiled script.

Why should one do a compiled script rather than a single or multiple work script? The answer is manifold. First, the compiled script cannot only be performed by students, but can also be put together by students. This "co-authorship" can have a very beneficial effect on the highly motivated student as well as on the less motivated one. The highly motivated can find a new direction in which to channel his or her energies, and the less motivated can gain a sense of accomplishment and involvement with the literature, knowing that he or she helped in completing the script. Second, the compiled script, being an accumulation of various kinds of literature, is a compact way of exposing students to many genres, many authors, many writing styles, and eventually many performance techniques. The third and probably most important advantage of the compiled script is that it provides an effective outlet for creative energy. The creative potential of many students can be stimulated through finding the literature, writing original material, selecting a theme, putting the script together, and performing the product of their efforts.

While there are many advantages in doing a compiled script, there are some drawbacks, too. A compiled script requires as much if not more time spent on organization and structure of materials as any other group performance of literature. The organization can make or break the success of a script. As Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, and Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey say in their book, Group Performance of Literature,

At its best, the compiled script is a creative synthesis of different but related literature; at its worst, it is unfocused and fragmented.³

Not only is building a compiled script time consuming, it also requires a large amount of decision-making concerning purpose, theme, and structure of the script as well as finding suitable materials to use in the compilation. If one has the time and the resources are available, the advantages of attempting a compiled script far outweigh the disadvantages.

The initial decision that must be made by the director/adapter deals with the overall concept or purpose he or she has in mind. Does he or she want to be persuasive or entertaining or both? Does he or she want to confront the audience, influence it to think about or act upon a specific problem ("Stop Nuclear Power")? Or does he or she wish to accomodate the spectators by giving them an entertaining, "sit-back-and-relax" kind of evening? It is not impossible, however, to persuade and entertain at the same time as one might do in an after dinner speech. The decision of being "rhetorical" or "poetic" will depend, of course, upon the context and occasion of the presentation of the script. The director/adapter should carefully consider the place where the performance will occur, the audience who will be watching, and the circumstances surrounding the performance when deciding upon his purpose. These factors will also be important in choosing a workable theme. For example, one might

choose a persuasive line of reasoning for a performance to be done for a meeting of the local labor union and an entertaining program for the city band boosters' picnic.

One of the most difficult steps in creating a compiled script is the determination of a workable and sufficiently limited theme. The director/adaptor usually begins with a broad topic area such as "crime." In order to narrow the theme, he or she should decide on a specific area to explore:

- 1) How many kinds of crime exist and what are they?
- 2) How does crime affect children? Adults? The elderly?
- 3) From what environment does crime begin? Why? How? When?
- 4) What personality types become criminals? Why?
- 5) How do rural crime rates stack-up against urban statistics?
- 6) Is crime always bad? Can it be good?
- 7) Do criminals get their just punishment or does only the victim suffer?
- 8) How is crime treated in and by the media?

All of these questions can transform the broad topic, "crime;" into a specific, limited, and workable theme for a compiled script.

Finding suitable literary material is the next step in creating a compiled script. This job can be done solely by the director/adaptor or can be a class project with various students searching for acceptable pieces. Following is a list of several sources that may direct one to or provide workable material.

(This writer realizes the importance of choosing works of lit-

erary merit, but also believes that students may be motivated even further by incorporating some pieces that might not be thought quite as meritorious.)

1) Library Sources

Short Story Index

Poetry Index

Poetry Anthologies

Short Story Anthologies

Periodical Guide

Dictionaries

Encyclopedias

Almanacs

Newspapers

Excerpts from Novels

Radio Scripts

Television Scripts

Plays

Limericks

Haikus

Textbooks

2) Jingles

3) Joke Books

4) Original Material (especially from students)

A good method of collecting material is to initially gather as much as can be found and then decide what will be used and what will be discarded. It is always easier to cut out than add extra.

Once the director/adapter has established an appropriate theme and found sufficient material, he or she must then decide how to treat that theme and material structurally. At least two basic types of compiled scripts exist, and these types can be categorized into two general groupings: 1) the presentation of several aspects of an idea experienced through various attitudinal voices (several readers take on different attitudes related to the exploration of the theme and may or may not undergo a change in character) and 2) the presentation of material organized causally which uses characters that remain consistent throughout the script (readers perform specific roles and most undergo some sort of change).

After determining the basic structure of the script, the adapter must then "decorate" his framework. The specific composition of the script is the next step. Composition becomes an easier task if one has rules to follow. Louis B. Horst and Carroll Russell, in their book Modern Dance Forms, suggest several structural patterns for composition.⁴ Although the book is written for dancers, its suggestions can be easily applied to building a compiled script.

One possible form of composition is the Sonata form following an ABA pattern. With this form, the adapter begins with the original theme (crime is detrimental to society), presents a contrasting aspect of this theme (in spite of its detrimental effects, crime serves as a boost to the United States' economy), and then returns to the original theme in a somewhat different aspect (generally, crime is detrimental to society). The B sec-

tion of this form is not quite as important nor takes as much time as the A section but should be provided for the sake of variety and manipulation of the theme. Horst and Russell equate the ABA form with life itself: "we are born, we live, we return to the unknown."⁵ The ABA pattern can be expanded to include other manipulations of the main theme--ABCA or ABCBA or ABCAB. The C is often a transitional idea. The more parts that are added, the more complex and, hopefully, more interesting the script becomes.

Theme and variation is another possible method of composing a compiled script. Theme and variation allows more freedom than the ABA form as there is no need to return to the specifics of the first theme aspect that is stated. The same theme is kept throughout, but any number of variations may be presented. Again, using the general topic of "crime," one might choose "The effects of crime" as his theme. Variations on that theme might include:

- 1) How does crime affect the elderly?
- 2) How does crime affect the poor?
- 3) How does crime affect the wealthy?
- 4) How does crime affect the children?

There are many variations on any given theme the adapter might choose.

A completely different pattern the adapter might choose is the Rondo--ABACADAEAF A etc. Different variations and manipulations can be performed through the B,C,D,E, and F parts, but they are always tied together by the A or central theme. An example using the Rondo pattern would be organized as follows:

A--Crime doesn't pay!

B--Jesse James was one of the most famous men in American history, but he died in disgrace.

A--Crime doesn't pay!

C--The Mafia is one of the wealthiest organizations in the United States, but it also has a very high fatality rate.

A--Crime doesn't pay!

D--David Berkowitz received an immeasurable amount of press coverage, but now he is in an insane asylum.

A--Crime doesn't pay!

One of the most difficult things to accomplish in a compiled script is moving from one piece of literature to another without making any particular piece seem more important than another. This can be accomplished through the use of unifying or transitional elements. For instance, a narrator or a repeated phrase may be used to tie the script together. Using a narrator brings added focus to main ideas and provides transitions from one idea to another. A repeated phrase, as in the previous example concerning "crime," also can provide smooth transitions. Other transitional elements can be discovered within the literature itself or from brainstorming activities.

Only basic ideas and suggestions concerning advantages, purpose, theme selection, sources of material, and methods of structure have been presented here. Perhaps the suggestions have provided some alternatives to composition by "inspiration" alone.

The compiled script can be an exciting, challenging, and rewarding way of producing a successful Readers Theatre. Hopefully,

the ideas and suggestions offered will be of some value for those who wish to try a compiled script. The writer also has the desire that this article will provide stimulation for other thoughts and ideas on the compiled script.

Notes

¹ Louis B. Horst and Carroll Russell, Modern Dance Forms (San Francisco: Impulse Publications, 1961), p. 23.

² For further information concerning single and multiple work scripts, see Alan W. Benson. "The Drama Director and Readers Theatre: Blessing or Curse?" The Speech Teacher, 17 (November, 1968), 328-330; Keith Brooks and John E. Bielenberg. "Readers Theatre as defined by New York Critics," Southern Speech Journal, 29 (Summer Issue, 1964), 228-302; Leslie Irene Coger. "Theatre for Oral Interpreters," The Speech Teacher, 12 (November, 1963), 322-330; Joanna Hawkins Maclay, Readers Theatre: Toward a Grammar of Practice (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 7-11.

³ Beverly Whitaker Long, Lee Hudson, and Phillis R. Jeffrey, Group Performance of Literature (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 25.

⁴ Horst and Russell, pp. 23-27.

⁵ Horst and Russell, p. 24.

Bibliography

Horst, Louis B. and Carroll Russell. Modern Dance Forms. San Francisco: Impulse Publications, 1961.

Long, Beverly Whitaker, Lee Hudson, and Phillis Rienstra Jeffrey. Group Performance of Literature. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971.

