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Interactive Drama: Deconstructing Theatre
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Turning Theatre On Its Head

Interactive Drama is a new form of theatre which takes traditional forms and turns them on their head and inside out. It has similarities to Environmental Theatre, Hyperdrama, and Psychodrama but is not a subtype of any of these. It is a new form. In this brief essay, we'll explore some of these links to other forms and discover some characteristics which set Interactive Drama apart. We'll also discuss ways in which Interactive Drama deconstructs are more traditional notions of drama.

Just what the devil is an Interactive Drama? There are as many definitions of what Interactive Drama as there are troupes practicing it. First we should determine what Interactive Drama **is not**:

- Interactive Drama is not Interactive Theatre as the term is used for Virtual Theatre in which live actors interact with virtual objects (generated by a computer).
- Interactive Drama is not Interactive Drama as the term is used for computer virtual reality programs in which the computer user controls a virtual actor who acts with other computer constructs in a completely virtual theatre. Basically, this form of Interactive Drama is an educational computer game program.
- Interactive Drama is not box drama in which an audience sits passively watching a performance by actors upon a stage.
- Interactive Drama is not performance theatre in which actors present the same piece as rehearsed from a preset narrative or dialogue.

So . . . that tells us what Interactive Drama is not so we must now discern what it actually is.

Interactive Drama is a scenario-driven form of theatre akin to parlor drama games played in the 14th century but more directly related to similar games played since the early 1970s. Most Interactive Dramas today take the form of live action role playi ng games, freeform role plays, and murder mystery whodunits. However, there are more and more theatre performance groups experimenting with the form - with actors portraying roles and "audience members" brought into the plot (this is most common in the m urder mystery dinner theatre circuit but can be found in other experimental groups. For more information on live role plays, the best place to check is the *Live Action Role Playing Frequently Aske d Questions* (LARP FAQ) available on the net. There is also a very informative Interactive Murder Mystery FAQ file available.

Basically, in an Interactive Drama, each participant is both performer and audience. Each participant is assigned a role (although in some groups, participants make up their own characters) - a character who fits into the scenario's plot. The players then improvise lines and actions in order to achieve the goals of their characters. Only the scenario writer or director knows the Whole Truth - through conversation and improvisation, the performers role play until the evening's plot is resolved on way or another. Every time the scenario is played there may be a different conclusion but any given group would only play a scenario once. Scenarios become very design intensive and unfortunately there aren't many to go around. Most groups design their ow n. Some groups perform inter-connected scenarios using the same characters, in serial or chronicle form, with the stories leading into one another while others create entirely new ones for each outing.

Since there are already good resources available on how to design an Interactive Drama scenario, I won't go into detail here - that is not my purpose. I will however recommend a couple short essays on the subject for interested readers:

- *A Beginner's Guide to Freeforms* - This brief article by Australian Freeform writers Tonia Walden and Louise Pieper is an excellent resource.
- *Introduction to Freeform Games* - This introduction by Andrew Rilestone also gives quite a few pointers for developing and writing scenarios. Andrew is the editor for the journal Interacti ve Fantasy.

In addition to my own web site on the subject, the *Shakespeare Eclectic Science Fiction Interactive Theatre* (now *Interactive Drama*), those wishing more

information on running Interactive Dramas might like to try the *Interactive Literature Foundation* (now *Live Action Roleplaying Association* web pages.

Interactive Drama and Environmental Theatre

Those who practice Interactive Drama usually don't think of themselves as participating in a form of theatre, but that's exactly what they're doing. Interactive Drama is a form of deconstructed drama which takes the Environmental Theatre paradigm of c ombining spaces for audience and performer and eliminates the difference between the two completely. In Interactive Drama, the actor is the audience.

Interactive Dramas are not performed for an audience in the traditional way. Rather, each of the actors is also a member of the audience and vice versa. There are usually no detached observers who act as non-participating audience members. Rather, ea ch member of the audience has a role to play

Since the members of the audience are also the performers, the space no longer need be limited to a stage or performance venue. Interactive Dramas are created/run/performed/played in venues as diverse as dinner theatre restaurants, meeting halls, hote l lobbies, and private homes. The space becomes less important as the environment. Usually, those running an Interactive Drama make an effort to transform the mundane surroundings into an illusion of another space or time (science fiction and fantasy ar e by and far the most common genres for Interactive Drama with gothic punk vampire scenarios using the *Mind's Eye Theatre* system published by White Wolf (the folks whose work inspired the *Kindred: The Embraced* television series)).

In Interactive Dramas, the audience and the performer is neither separated by space nor by function. The performer is the audience of her own and other's performance. There is still "drama" and "tension" in that the outcome of the plot is still a mys tery.

Interactive Drama and Hyperdrama

Hyperdrama is very similar in spirit to Interactive Drama in that the ending of the performance is not set. The audience chooses to follow various characters and plots - changing how they perceive the story from performance to performance.

Hyperdrama has a great deal in common with action-mazes or find-your-own-adventure books. The term "hyper" - "drama" comes from "hypertext," the text

construction format of the World Wide Web with links leading to jumps from text to text with seemingl y endless possibilities in terms of where the performance can go. However, this is an illusion. The performance possibilities are still finite as they are still script driven. The actors still perform their "lines" and the audience, despite the added c ontrol over the "hyper" elements of the drama, is still relegated to the role of passive voyeur. The various "interactive movies" available on CD-ROM are good examples of the basics of the form - albeit not usually very exceptional

The game like qualities of hyperdrama have a great deal in common with the playful qualities of Interactive Drama. The beginnings of freeform endings and multiple plots are also shared by the two. However, Interactive Drama goes further by not having a set script and using improvisational means to create the multiple - now truly infinite - possibilities for plot development.

For more on hyperdrama, the reader is encouraged to read Charles Deemer's excellent *introduction*, *essay*, and examples.

Interactive Drama and Psychodrama

Psychodrama was begun by J.L. Moreno as a form of therapy. His work with the use of drama with psychotherapy was groundbreaking and is still emulated - with a tremendous and beneficial legacy. Moreno was also very interested in improvisational theatr e - his *Theatre of Spontaneity* is still worth study by serious scholars in the field.

It is with psychodrama that Interactive Drama shares a great deal - closed performance venues for performers only, brief scenarios, loose improvisational performance, and the like. Some Interactive Dramas - such as the Australian convention Holocaust freeforms - are in fact little more than trauma-intense psychodramas disguised as games.

A key difference between psychodrama and Interactive Drama though is catharsis and purpose. The psychodramatist creates a scenario for therapeutic purposes in order to help achieve a specific healing purpose for the participants. The interactive dram atist's first concern is pleasure in terms of "game play" or entertainment. This doesn't mean the interactive dramatist may not have catharsis and release built into her scenarios - we've all read Aristotle on this subject - but it is not the chief goal of the performance.

Interactive Drama as Deconstructed Drama

Most of the experimental drama forms discussed thus far in one way or another attempts to challenge our preconceptions regarding theatre. Interactive Drama never set out to do that but it may very well be the most successful in creating a kind of *Theatre of Deconstruction*. As we're all aware, Deconstruction is the philosophical and critical movement expressed in the writings of Jacques Derrida which questions the foundations of the expression of thought and literature by questioning the very premises upon which they are grounded. The ideas caught on quickly amongst academics and spread like wildfire into just about every discipline in the humanities and then into the arts. We've seen Deconstruction Criticism, Deconstruction Architecture an d Painting, Deconstruction Fiction and Non-Fiction, and even Deconstruction Film. There have also been a few experiments in Deconstruction Theatre.

Many of these experiments in Deconstruction were less than successful, most being little more than some pedant or "artiste" trying to steal some thunder or to jump on the Deconstruction Bandwagon or by rather low-talent charlatans trying desperately to do something new and shocking to somehow prove they weren't as lacking in talent as they believed they knew in their hearts they were.

All that may or may not be so, but the Deconstructionists might find it fruitful to take a good look at Interactive Drama as it may very well have accomplished by point of unconscious practice what they couldn't do through contrivance. Taking into acc ount the need to somehow question or turn over the original premise of drama and still preserve it as drama, there are in fact quite a few ways in which Interactive Drama behaves very much like a form of Deconstructed Drama:

- In traditional forms of drama, the audience and performers are separated by space and function. In Interactive Drama, they are one and the same. The audience becomes the performer and vice versa.
- Traditionally the actors know the outcome of the plot and the audience watches patiently waiting to passively discover the outcome of the play. In an Interactive Drama, the actors/audience has no idea of the final outcome. Everything is "improvised" - each performer tries to achieve the goals of her character while discovering, helping, or hindering those of others.
- While a standard play presents the dialog and lines for the character, the story reveals the "character" and nature of the personality. In an Interactive Drama, the participant may be given a very detailed run down of her character's personality, des ires, goals, experiences, but she may not be told how she fits in with the other characters or what to say.

- A traditional play is usually written linearly - even one with a very complicated plot with many off-shooting sub-branches or subplots. That is the story goes from point A to point B in a logical and orderly fashion. By the end of the evening's perf ormance, the audience has all of the information the playwright intended to be revealed with no loose ends. Everything leads to a single conclusion. However, in an Interactive Drama, there may be no single conclusion. A piece of evidence may be hidden by one of the participants, or lost. The scenario is not written linearly but in the structure of a geodesic dome with characters having relationships with many other characters - some active others passive depending upon the particular run of the scenar io and "how things go." This sort of story structure can be very exciting . . . and extremely frustrated to write or perform.

Given these factors - and others I will have to go into at a later date - one can very easily see how Interactive Drama, by its nature, challenges the very premises of traditional drama but manages to retain much that makes drama drama.

Interactive Drama as Game

In all honesty, the most exciting aspect of Interactive Drama is not related to performance but to game play. Here we see some of Cary Clasz's ideas about play (as in drama) and play (as in game play) stretched to their natural limits. Predominately those who participate in Interactive Drama do so because they consider it to be a social game - not because they consider it to be a new and exciting form of theatre (that's for the academics and the theorists to argue about).

Now, as far as the serious "thespian" goes, even the game elements of Interactive Drama can be useful. More and more working theatres are using Interactive Dramas as rehearsal techniques - particularly as they can be used as improvisational acting tra ining. A few companies have incorporated elements of Interactive Drama into their roles as dinner theatres or they've used "real" actors mixed with customers to create more realistic and "professional" runs of mystery interactive dramas. Some of the mur der mystery dinner theatres and weekends, such as the Murder Mystery Weekends created by Keith O'Leary and Margo Morrison, have used this formula very successfully.

Conclusion

This article's purpose was never to turn any of the readers of the **The Journal at Theatre Central** into advocates of Interactive Drama in any of its forms. Rather, I merely wanted to introduce some of the major types, styles, and theoretical

background to this new and vibrant dramatic form. Interactive Dramas are quite exciting and well worth consideration by any group. They certainly are not practical for every group and will never replace more traditional spectator-based forms of dramatic performance but they do have a place in theatre dialogue and are well worth the investment in time and energy and effort for those with the interest.

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Dr. Brian David Phillips is currently and Associate Professor in the English Department at National Chengchi University in Taipei, Taiwan. His M.A. is in Communication and Theatre from Pittsburg State University and his doctoral dissertation is on *Interactive Drama* for his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from National Taiwan University (completed 1998).

Brian uses various forms of Interactive Drama activities in his English as a Foreign Language classes along with more traditional drama exercises. He has published extensively on language learning and games, particularly on the use of role playing gam es and narrative and trading card games with language learners.

For those interested in more information on Interactive Drama, Brian maintains the Scenario-Based Theatre Style Interactive Drama Freeform Roleplaying Games Archive web site as a scenarios archive. He is also the editor of the online peer-reviewed Journal of Interactive Drama and the founding president of the Taipei Interactive Theatre Society.

In addition to his interests in Interactive Drama, Prof. Phillips is a *Certified Hypnotherapist* and a *Board Certified Hypnotist*.