

REID GILBERT / Performing The Capilano Review

TCR has always presented a high ratio of image to text, arranged in a particular visual aesthetic created by its founding editor, Pierre Coupey, and followed exactly by some subsequent editors and somewhat more loosely by others. The second series, beginning in 1989, continued to reflect Coupey's dual interest as a painter and a poet. Typically, an issue publishes 80 pages of text and eight images. During Coupey's editorship, the images were interspersed among the text; in more recent issues, colour images have most often been printed on coated stock in a signature in the centre, but black and white images can appear through the magazine and, in fact, some recent issues have contained more than one section of four-colour images.

To me, this interrelationship of text and image has always seemed more than the simple accident of selection, and I have long suspected it contributes to the magazine's success. Like many of the published texts, the illustrations often stretch genre boundaries. Perhaps I notice the linkage of image to text in each issue and the elasticity of genre because these interplays among signs gesture toward a fundamental characteristic of theatre—the genre that most interests me and has been least represented in the Review. While the position of Drama Editor, which I held from 1982 to 1988, disappeared in 1989,¹ and very few plays have ever been published by *The Capilano Review*, I suggest there is something essentially theatrical in the very process of reading the magazine.

To me, the Review—and here I mean the actual little magazine, the artifact—is a kind of concretization of the process of theatrical reception. (It was for this reason that I designed issue #35, which I guest edited in 1985, to be a rehearsal journal and a visualization of the process of building a play.) Like a play, the magazine *performs itself* as a vehicle for interpretation, a physical entity to be “read onto” by the readers who are, simultaneously, “reading out” the content of various literary and visual texts. Readers are not asked merely to absorb the works, images, and ideas of the texts and to react to each, but are invited to link the visual with the verbal (and to do so in a manner learned from previous “attendance” at this magazine) in a kind of unfolding aesthetic performance.

Of course, reading any text or viewing any image demands an involvement by the reader's imagination—that is axiomatic to the process of reading. What I find

provocative here, however, is the possibility that each magazine, which may appear on the surface simply to be a collection of closed texts, actually encourages the reader to enter or leave at various points (rather than only to read from cover to cover) because of the exchanges among written and visual media. I suspect most readers flip forward and back so that each reader links different texts in tandem or superimposes one text already read onto another, or onto an image seen or to be seen, so that different “writings” emerge. While a reader may move about in any anthology, the editorial strategy of *TCR* appears to urge such movement: the act of reading the magazine is presented, then, as a species of performative, an “acting-forth” that creates meaning in its genesis and is brought into being by the readers as they combine and respond, remember and anticipate, superimpose image onto text, and build a singular metatext during the period of each engagement.

By this process, the Review—which exists as a completed and printed record—curiously takes on an essential characteristic of theatrical performance. Peggy Phelan has observed that “Theatre continually marks the perpetual disappearance of its own enactment” (115), continuing Derrida’s comment in *Writing and Difference* that “The theatre is born of its own disappearance. . .” (233; see also Phelan 115). In creating itself in the instant of its own demise, theatrical writing differs from the writing of a story or poem that is already formed, as Atwood once imagined it, on a page that “waits, pretending to be blank” (“The Page,” sec.1) and exists before and after the moment of reading. Something lurks inside the page—a conscious comment by the author or, as Atwood posits, “everything that has ever happened” (sec. 5), or, as I might claim, a Derridean “trace”—and most readers, she suggests, passively submerge themselves in it, some of them, indeed, “without deciding, without meaning to” (sec. 4).

They also, however, only turn the pages front to back. Atwood urges another entry to the page, an approach that resembles the reception of drama and differs from a typical reading strategy. She notices there is not only writing on the front and back of the page, but also writing “beneath” it (sec.5; original emphasis). Apparently empty, but dangerously full, this “underneath-ness” waits in the depths of the blank page for its reader to find it just as it waits at the core of drama for its auditor to “write” it.

By suggesting such an avenue to the page’s core, Atwood opens out the process of reading fiction and poetry, but she also makes clear that most readers do not follow this path; instead they take other routes that are equally possible and are also useful in reading the page. By contrast, there are no other routes to follow in viewing a play.

Only theatre fills the void at its centre exclusively by the act of reception. Theatre is a creation not of its playwright or director, but of its spectators, who write the story onto the bodies of the actors and onto an auditory and visual semiosis, forging a *mise-en-scene* arising from an ancient *mise-en-abyme*, that exists outside, but lends itself to, the spectator's desire for presence—including her psychological need to locate her own presence in space-time.²

Such a birthing into dramatic language (which is a marriage of the semantic and the physical) depends upon repetition: the repetition of theatrical conventions, of bodily movements and of received literary devices. Indeed, Butler's observation about gender, which she considers to be simply "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33), can be applied equally powerfully to theatre, where "repeated stylization[s]" create the "body" of the play. Taken all together, the history of the Review (which can also be viewed as a "body of work," of course) has evolved a kind of theatrical "body" by a similarly "repeated stylization" extending from its first issue.

Subscribers pick up each issue knowing the general appearance of this "body," but are astonished by the costumes it—this time—wears; the postures it—this time—assumes; the set upon which it—this time—dances; and the pictures that—this time—dress that set. The act of reading the issue—especially for subscribers, as for habitual theatregoers—is the moment of unfolding of the drama and, as in a play, that moment fades as each page is turned. Like drama, the Review recedes, drawing the reader toward the lack at its core, asking for a partner in inscription and revealing itself only by the mutual act of naming.³

To use Austin's terms, *TCR*—in its entirety, in the history this issue celebrates—is not, then, a constative utterance, but is, rather, a performative utterance.⁴ Because they hold a printed magazine, readers may approach any text a second time (and, in doing so, seem to deny the link with performance), but approached in a different order, the second reading simply becomes another performative act. The issue opens itself again for viewing and, in this genus of speech act, the issue waits again to be "read onto."

I have always regretted that so few plays have appeared in the Review. Perhaps, instead, this absence should be read as a mark of "the immanence of its own process of enunciation" (Zizek 99), a placeholder to be "written onto" by the readers. Drama

exists in the Review not in kind, but in process. Indeed, it is the very immateriality of its performing “body” that links reading *TCR* to the disappearance of the drama, and makes reading the magazine an act of theatrical reception.

NOTES

¹ As did the separate positions of poetry and fiction editor, it should be noted.

² For a much fuller discussion of this notion, see my series of articles on Panych and Gorling’s *Overcoat*, especially “Panych and Gorling: ‘Sheer’ Texts ‘Written’ in(to) Perception.” In this small comment I am assuming definitions and employing an approach based in what I have elsewhere attempted to define and to theorize in depth as the theatrical “sheer.”

³ This notion of a self constituted in loss and interpellated through performative acts is essentially Lacanian. Cf. Lacan’s notion of the formulation of the self in the mirror stage in *Ecrits*, and his later insistence that the subject is read backwards from the Other, discussed at length by Slavoj Žižek (102-06, *et passim*).

⁴ See Sandy Petrey for a particularly helpful overview of Austin’s notions of utterance and speech act.

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. “The Page.” *Murder in the Dark*. Toronto: Coach House, 1983.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.
- Gilbert, Reid. “Panych and Gorling: ‘Sheer’ Texts ‘Written’ in(to) Perception.” *Modern Drama* 45 (2002): 282-97.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978.
- Lacan Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York and London: Norton, 1977. Chap.1.
- Petrey, Sandy. “Castration, Speech Acts, and the Realist Difference: *S/Z* versus *Sarrasine*.” *PMLA* 102 (1987): 153-65.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.