

THE THEATRE PROGRAMME: A PUBLIC DISCOURSE AT A STAGING OF MAXWELL ANDERSON'S *ANNE OF THE THOUSAND DAYS*

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This paper will consider an undervalued text: the theatre programme. There is a paucity of literature in this area. The existing criticism explores either the history of the programme or analyses the content of the programmes in various theatrical productions. This paper will discuss the role of the theatrical programme as a meaning making tool. Specifically, it will consider the meaning making role of the programme at a staging of Maxwell Anderson's *Anne of the Thousand Days* at the Brisbane Powerhouse. Crossbow Productions staged ten performances of the play from June 7th to 17th 2004. My role in the production was as producer and actor. I also facilitated the symposiums that were held after selected performances. After expounding the terms 'theatrical event' and 'public discourses' this paper will give a brief overview of the construction of a contemporary programme. Observations of the audience interaction with the theatre programme before, during and after the performances at this theatrical event will be noted. While the changing role of the programme at this event will be touched upon, this paper focuses on the importance of the programme as a signifier. It will be seen that the programme works as a material signifier that embodies and represents the interrelationship between written text, performance text and audience. Moreover, the role of this signifier changes before, during and after the theatrical event.

For Patrice Pavis, the 'theatrical event' is

[t]heatrical performance when considered not with respect to the fictional aspects of its fabula but rather as reality as an artistic practice that effects an exchange between actor and spectator (1998, 132).

To define a theatrical event as a 'play', a 'production' or 'theatre' naturally marginalises one, if not more contributors to the theatrical event. In these terms the drama text, director's reading and even the theatre space are given authority over the role of the audience participant. 'Theatrical event' embraces the many texts that are interwoven to create the fabric of the 'happening' that is the theatrical event. The drama text and performance text work together with myriad public discourses to create the theatrical event.

The term 'public discourses' was introduced by Ric Knowles in his 2004 text *Reading the Material Theatre* to describe a range of texts or signifiers that inform the conditions of reception. Marvin Carlson

had already constructed a limited list of these signifiers in his research into theatre semiotics. Public discourses include a range of written, visual, spatial, auditory and sensory texts read by audiences at any theatrical event. For the purposes of this paper, the term 'public discourse' and 'text' will be used interchangeably. This paper explores the significance of one of the written texts: the theatre programme.

The programme began to evolve into its present day form in the mid nineteenth century. The word 'programme' comes from the Greek term *programma* meaning a "written public notice." The programme has always existed as a public text with the purpose of notifying the audience of the "list of events or items in an entertainment" (Collins Dictionary, 2001, 182). These 'list of items' have come to include "comprehensive and fairly elaborate data about the cast, the playwright, the drama, the performance and the stage manager" (Net 1993, 317) among other inclusions specific to theatrical companies. A notable exception to this general 'playbill' format is the German play booklets from theatres such as those of Bochum, Stuttgart or Berlin, which contain detailed essays, pictorials, statistics and quotations (Pavis 1998, 287). Notably missing are actor's biographies, advertising of any sort, a list of sponsors, a synopsis, a note on the theatre company, a director's note or a list of 'thank you.' Significant in the German programmes is the privileging of the dramatic text over the advertising of personalities or companies. As theatre semiotician James Harbeck observes, "[w]e mustn't forget that the most important audience for many of the credits (in particular the smaller print ones) is often the people named in them (1998, 223).

While an analysis of the content included in a programme is of interest the purpose of this paper is to explore audience interaction with the programme as a sign vehicle for meaning making at one theatrical event.

Harbeck argues that "only the program is designed to enter the time and space of the event itself" (1998, 215). Given before the performance, generally outside the theatre, it is carried inside the auditorium and taken home at the conclusion of the event. It is the only public discourse from the happening of the event that is owned solely by the audience collective. At the performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days* the programme was viewed before, during and after the production. Several methods were employed to maximise and observe audience interaction with the programme: free copies of the programme were given to every audience member on entering the theatre, the director of the production sat in the theatre and observed the audience during the play and at interval and symposia were held after select performances during which audiences commented on the programme. Over half of the audience commenced reading the programme before the house lights were dimmed. This is to be expected as audience members prepare to enter the fictional world of the play. Mariana Net suggests that the programme becomes an "interfictional [reference], standing in between the 'reality' of the finite performance [. . .] and the 'illusion' that the audience are finally meant to appropriate" (1993, 317). Audiences familiarise themselves with the historical setting of the play and the characters that make up the fabula. Special attention is often given to the length of the journey into this fictional world and audiences may pay particular attention to the recorded minute length of the first and subsequent acts and whether there is an interval. Before the play the programme is an introduction to the journey to be undertaken. An audience interaction with the programme at this stage mirrors the actions of an actor or director who picks up a play for the first time. The programme functions, therefore, as a written text not dissimilar to the written play itself. Just as the written text is transformed into a performance text for a theatre evening, the function of the programme shifts significantly as the performance begins.

During performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days* audience members were observed frequently

referring to the programme during the first act. This was most prevalent during scene changes, but also took place as certain actors exited the stage. It may be assumed that audience members were viewing the role of certain actors or the settings of the scenes that were noted in the programme. This gaze at the programme continued into interval where audience members left the auditorium and now referred more actively to the programme. Conversations were noted that referred specifically to the material printed in the programme. During interval both the play and the material supplied in the programme were discussed. Interaction with the programme waned during the second act. This could be accounted for by the significant dimming of the lighting and also by the audience's familiarity with the play and the programme by this time.

After the performance the significance of the programme changed yet again. Those that remained in the audience for the symposium sat clutching their programmes, as if they were to be examined on their texts. Others left with programmes placed in bags to be taken home and kept, perhaps, as souvenirs or some documentation of their attendance at this particular event. As Joyce Sirota argues, "a [theatre programme] is thought of as a keepsake rather than a disposable item" (in Harbeck 1998, 235). Interestingly, only three programmes were left behind in the theatre over the entire ten performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days*.

The symposium discussions were constructed to privilege the audience voice and the facilitator refrained from asking specific questions about any public discourses. Interestingly, the programme was referred to in all of the symposiums and discussed at length in one symposium. In the symposiums the information in the programmes became a catalyst to further discussions on the use of music, costuming, scenography and character portrayal. As the written and performance texts were analysed, so was the programme. Significantly, the audience's seeming 'ownership' of the programme and its material presence, allowed detailed discussion and scrutiny of the programme during the symposia. Audiences readily commented on what they liked and did not like in the programme of *Anne of the Thousand Days*. The programme included the standard contents: biographies, director's note, thank yous and a fairly comprehensive historical note. As Susan Bennett comments, "[a]udiences of history plays are given most 'help'" (1997, 136) in programmes. The historical notes, the text which referred to the various public discourses in the play such as music and costuming and the biographies of the actors were aspects of the programme that drew the most attention. The programme contained no advertising material which would have introduced another functional layer for the programme text. The most interesting comments were made about the cover design. One participant commented "I liked the picture, the dripping heart, the red and black, but I don't like the words—'Sex + Marriage = Bloodshed'—I don't like it, it hits you over the head." This comment on the textual discourse of the cover design worked to further privilege the material role of the programme in this theatrical event. It would be unusual for a contemporary audience to critique the title of a play. Yet ownership of the programme seemingly entitled the audience to freely discuss all aspects of the programme. One participant criticised the programme for not including photographs of the actors. This may reflect an audience's expectations of what a programme should contain and could be viewed as similar to a reader's expectations of the construction of a book or magazine. From this perspective, the programme was not only a meaning making tool for the production, but became an autonomous text in itself.

The significance of the programme text changed over the period of time of the theatrical event. Before the performance of *Anne of the Thousand Days* the gaze of the audience was focused on the programme. Once the performance began the gaze shifted to the stage with occasional gazes back to the programme. Audiences interacted with the programme in a way not dissimilar to their interaction with the performance text. In light of this audience interaction, the programme text can be seen as

an essential tool in meaning making at the performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days*.

The very act of 'reading' a programme in a theatrical event can work to suggest a more passive role for the audience rather than an interactive one. Patrice Pavis argues that the programme can "cast [the spectator] in the role of the reader" (1998, 288). The passive interaction with the programme before the performances of *Anne of the Thousand Days* quickly shifted to a more active interaction as the gaze of the audience alternated between performance text and programme text. Similarly the programme became more of a referential text at interval as it became an interpreting tool in conversations about the play. As one participant in a symposium argued "the programme served to help you find out something you didn't know or forgot." From this perspective, the programme can also be seen as an appendix or a glossary of the event. Pavis goes on to argue that the programme bears the "risk of over directing the spectator's vision" and distract[ing] [the] spectator from his scopical drive" (1998, 287). Both of these arguments refer to the gaze of the audience. It is important to remember, although obvious, that the gaze of the audience is purely voluntary. That the programme is an optional form of reference to the play was articulated by a participant in one of the symposiums. The participant commented "it was a comprehensive programme, and that was good because you could take it or leave it. If it's not there, people are lost." Not all audience members would agree with the latter statement, yet the comment does point out the need for an optional navigation tool as a gate of entry into the theatrical event. Charging the audience for the programme would further heighten the optionality of this navigational tool.

Once outside the theatrical event, the programme takes on myriad forms. In its material form the programme functions as a document, a public notice and a souvenir. The programme could almost be seen to represent a material gift, a memento or a souvenir of the play created solely for the audience. In the hands of some audience members it may take the form of a fan, a place to dispose chewing gum or sheets of paper to inscribe with notes. Owned by a critical reviewer or as a theatrical archive in a library or museum, the meaning of the programme text changes yet again. The signification of the programme as a text is highlighted by the fact that it was used by critics in this event to inform their published critical reviews. It is interesting to note that in a library or a museum, the programme evolves into an autonomous text, particularly for those that have not seen the play.

Previous researchers such as Ann Wilson, James Harbeck and Susan Bennett have seen the role of the programme to "direct an audience's reception" (Wilson 1992), to "directly influence appreciation" (Harbeck 1998) and to "prepare the audience" (Bennett 1997). All of these strongly suggest a more didactic function of the programme appropriated by the director, producer or theatre company with the purpose of 'directing', 'influencing' and 'preparing' an audience. These perspectives can be seen to further privilege directorial authority. Wilson argues that a programme should "appeal to its audience [by making an audience] feel at home in its house and satisfied with the fare offered" (1992, 54). An audience orientated programme would, perhaps, create a public discourse that not only informs but is an integral part of the theatrical event.

In *Anne of the Thousand Days* the programme acted not only as a gateway into the fabula of the play, a reference tool and navigational device but also became a meaning making tool in itself similar in significance to the performance and written texts. The observed audience gaze at the programme, the symposium comments and the programme's significance as reflective 'souvenir' all contributed to the significance of the theatre programme, at this theatrical event, as an essential meaning making device. The theatre programme remains essentially a public discourse that is written solely for and belongs solely to the audience. The clutch of the programme and the gaze at the programme re-affirm the audience's ownership of that text. Their interaction with the programme text is an active interaction.

The theatrical programme is the material signifier of the audience interrelationship with the performance and written texts. Importantly, I would argue that the programme is a dynamic text not because it changes, but because its meaning changes from before to during and after the theatrical event. The programme is a connotative text that, when taken home, signifies the audience member's relationship with the theatrical experience long after the event has finished.

References

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