



CRITICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERACTIVE DRAMA

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The following is part of one of my research project proposals related to *Interactive Drama*.
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Since I have a background in drama and literature (my **B.A.** is in *Speech and Drama* from *Kansas Wesleyan University*, I have a **M.A.** in *Communication and Theatre* from *Pittsburg State University*, and my **Ph.D.** is in *English and Comparative Literature* from *National Taiwan University* with my doctoral dissertation on *Interactive Drama: Critical Perspectives on Freeform Role Plays as Drama*), I would really like to do more formal academic work on the whys, wherefores, whatevers, and what-haves of *Interactive Drama* and related activities. When I get the chance to really sit down and work it all out, I would like to take a closer look at *Interactive Drama*, *Mind's Eye Theatre*, *Interactive Literature*, *Freeforms*, *Interactive Theatre*, *Murder Mystery Whodunits*, and other *live action role play systems* and how they relate to more traditional drama in performance (standard and improvisational forms) and literature

Specifically, I would like to take a theoretical look at the *interactive literature* (*interactive drama*) activities which carry many similarities to drama,



scenario dramas, and improvisational theatre. However, there are differences which are quite striking and - to me - profound. In these activities (and there are a large variety which I would need to categorize) participants are given character descriptions from which they improvise scenes with the other participants. Basically, through role play the characters interact until the problem/conflict of the scenario is solved or resolved.

The performers in *Interactive Drama* are unaware of the final solution until they have come by it through role play - usually there are red herrings built into the plot which the characters must analyze and discard before coming to the author's conclusion (however, how they come about their solution may very well be quite different from the author's predictions). In a nutshell, *Interactive Drama* takes some of the early presuppositions behind *Environmental Theatre* and its desire to break down the invisible wall which separates audience from performer and explodes them by having the audience become the performer - while maintaining the performance of a narrative.

This explanation of *Interactive Drama* and my proposed approach is somewhat simplified for brevity. I don't want to give the impression that there's not much literature involved here. The scenarios are often quite detailed - most of the written preparation is as lengthy and as detailed as a play or a novella. In fact, one published scenario for White Wolf's *Mind's Eye* Theatresystem, *The Elder's Revenge*, (for the *Masquerade* setting - based upon the Vampire table top role playing game world) actually incorporates a traditional drama within it's construct - the participants role play characters who must rehearse and perform a play (with characters performing characters performing characters). These are not simple theatre games or role plays - they tend to be *bona fide* scenarios of a much more complicated sort.

There is a lot here similar to Richard Schechner's *Environmental Theatre* except that the play no longer simply involves the audience with the performance - the audience becomes both performer and actor. There are also strong parallels to the closed-system techniques found in Jacob Levy Moreno's *Theatre of Spontaneity* and *psychodrama* (parts of which were addressed by National Taiwan University Professor Chiu Chin-jung Lee's dissertation "What Trick Hast Thou Now" - *Four Studies of Falstaff* but this problem would be much more directed towards drama theoretics rather than Shakespearean criticism) such as closed performances with actor-as-audience except that instead of performing for catharsis and therapy, the participants are performing for pleasure (albeit there are some elements of catharsis here but not of a therapeutic nature - although one group in Australia did experiment with *Shock Drama* for cathartic effect but the

nature of the scenarios were usually too graphic and powerful so organizers shut them down). I have found a few *Interactive Theatre* troupes in the U.S. which use *Interactive Drama* for performances related to sexual abuse education. Others employ the techniques for purely entertainment motives.

Participants in *Interactive Dramas* usually do not think of themselves as performing a theoretical function - they see themselves as involved in an activity they do for *the fun of it*. I find the theoretical implications of what they do to be very interesting and exciting.

Incidentally, I prefer the term *Interactive Drama* or *Freeform* as it is used in the United Kingdom and Australia preferable to *LARP* as it is used in the United States - although *Interactive Drama/Theatre* is also very accurate in its description, albeit the term *Interactive Theatre* seems to have been appropriated by groups experimenting with *Virtual Theatre* with live actors and computer simulated environments and objects [unfortunately *Interactive Drama* may also soon be similarly appropriated by those creating a new breed of computer entertainment featuring completely computer generated actors and stages but for now it serves our purposes - naturally I would provide all relevant definitions and the like in my work, when I get a chance to get the thing started in full swing].

Contemporary *Interactive Drama* in the sense I am discussing has been around since the late 1960s and early 1970s - its growth paralleling that of table top role playing games (actually many of the troupes have used table top RPGs as their source material). However the activity has been around much longer. In *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, historian Barbara Tuchmann describes games played in the French Court in which attendees at a dinner were given papers with a description of a character from the *chanson-de-gestes* of the day and then played out an unscripted play in the role of that character. For this reason, Gordon Olmstead-Dean (president of the *Interactive Literature Foundation*) calls the activity "*a new art but not a new artform*." *Interactive Drama* is indeed new art in its relation to drama and to literature.

There are several critical or theoretical approaches we could take when examining *Interactive Drama* and I will outline a few here. Basically, I see the finished text of this project as encompassing several sections beginning with a brief history to provide background for the subject within the framework of the project followed by chapters related to writing and practice and then several theoretical approaches to the problem of *Interactive Drama* when examined as drama or literature. Some of these approaches are as follows:

- One of the most obvious critical approaches to *Interactive Drama* is as a form of *Deconstructive Drama* - in much the same way we now have *Deconstructive Film*, *Deconstructive Art*, and *Deconstructive Architecture* (these were all central studies in one of the doctoral seminars I took with Prof. Robert Magliola, then at National Taiwan University - yes *that* Robert Magliola). In practice, *interactive drama freeforms* do use a method of delivery for the narrative which is fairly deconstructive in nature. While in traditional drama the actors perform from a script and do not deviate with the audience watching to discover the story, the participants in a freeform are the audience and the actors - there usually is a scenario with each character performing a narrative function in the plot - but they create the final outcome together through improvisational means with the complete story and its implications to the characters not revealed until the final scene. The *interactive drama* paradigm is also used extensively within the written portions of the activity, with notes on costuming, props, scene, and act structure. Usually participants come to the venue in full costume and make-up. As drama is literature intended for performance, freeforms are also literature intended for performance but the means are different enough to be considered two different - albeit related - literary forms. Perhaps some of the critical ideas presented by Peter Brunette and David Wills about film have cross-over value here.
- A few other worthwhile approaches might include *Reader-Response Theory* which can also be adapted to this subject as can Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, Schechner's *Theatre and Anthropology* along with Turner's *Theatre and/as Ritual* and Viola Spolin's *Theatre Games*. Suzanne Langer's work on the theory of aesthetics might also prove useful. Keith Johnstone's work on *Improvisation and Theatre* has obvious applications in terms of discussing *Interactive Drama* performance styles and a few of John Elsom's wonderful observations about *Erotic Theatre* also apply.
- *Semiotics, Sign, and Meaning of Interactive Drama* might be an interesting approach too.
- Another approach which would prove useful would be a rather straightforward comparative literature style study in which the basic tenets and practices of *Interactive Drama* and traditional dramatic forms are outlined. Of course, this is also the underlying purpose of my entire study.

These are just some of the theoretical stances which might prove helpful in this project - however, as far as information about the specific practice, creation, and performance of *Interactive Drama* goes, I am very fortunate in terms of getting

materials. There are several forums available via the Internet, Usenet News, FTP, and the World Wide Web. Through these I have been able to make contacts with *Freeformers* in the United States, England, Australia, and elsewhere. This World Wide Web Page is dedicated as an archive of *Interactive Drama* scenarios. So, as you can see, my primary information sources and materials should quite robust.

Not only does this topic fit in with my own research interests and my background in drama, it is also related to similar activities I use with many of the classes I teach as an Associate Professor at *National Chengchi University* - including conversation classes as well as others. I also have quite a few publications on similar topics. I have written a regular column for a local magazine which deals with the table top, non performance versions of the activity.

