

Third Grade Children's Verbal and Visual Recall of *Monkey, Monkey*

by Jeanne Klein and Marguerite Fitch

Editor's Note. This study is one of the recipients of the 1989 AATE Research Award.

Abstract

A replication of previous research, this study describes 45 3rd graders' "dramatic literacy" and the modal sources for inferences. As found in the first study, the more children used visual cues (primarily dramatic actions), the more they used verbal and psychological cues. Inferences about the play's theme were related to aural recall of thematic dialogue and what children reported learning from the play.

Live theatre cannot have an impact on children's lives unless audiences recognize, comprehend, and recall the aesthetic values of plays with "dramatic literacy" (Collins). The National Endowment for the Arts (1988) recommends standardized testing in theatre, though expectancies in the AATE National Model Drama/Theatre Curriculum (1987) remain as untested hypotheses. Therefore, theatre researchers need to detail not only *what* dramatic content children retain, but *how* children use the aural, visual, and kinesthetic forms of theatre in qualitative ways (Goldberg; Saldaña 1987, 1989; Rosenblatt). Cognitive developmental research, and television studies in particular, provide analogous answers and potential solutions to both theoretical questions and methodological dilemmas (Bryant and Anderson; Klein 1988, 1989). By knowing what theatrical forms children rely on to derive critical inferences about dramatic content, and how plot structures and staging methods influence those responses, directors and designers may stage plays accordingly and educators may assess the aesthetic experiences of child audiences.

To these ends, an initial descriptive study was conducted with 5th graders and a production of *Don Quixote of La Mancha* (Klein 1987). Children relied heavily on explicit visual cues, which supported the visual superiority hypothesis of many media studies (Bryant and Anderson). They interpreted Quixote's superobjective, motive, and affective disposition primarily from his dramatic actions rather than from his dialogue, facial expressions, or mental state. Those who said they preferred theatre over television were also more likely to report feeling greater sadness over Quixote's death. These findings provided minimal support for the hypothesis that

live theatre may induce greater amounts of invested mental effort and deeper levels of emotional involvement over the television medium (Salomon). Because visual details are physically distant and spread across a proscenium stage, unlike dictated televised closeups, children may be required to work harder at integrating dialogue with visual modes in their inference-making endeavors.

As agents of dramatic action, characters display "emotional truths" about human behavior in plays. Children must make inferences about characters before they can empathize with them. The inability to see characters' facial expressions may inhibit inferences about characters' emotional states and require greater reliance on other visual and verbal cues.

Social cognitive psychologists find that, beginning around the age of 8 or 9 years, there is a developmental trend toward first inferring others' thoughts, followed by intentions and motives, and lastly emotions (Shantz 499). Identification of characters' emotions is usually attributed to situational factors based on perceived wants and attainments (Stein and Jewett). Children rely less on facial expressions because they recognize that a person's expression may be incongruent with a given situation (Reichenbach and Masters). While such "display rules," or the disguise of true feelings in public, are factors, cue strength or emotional intensity largely determines judgments about characters' emotions (Camras). A child's emotional predisposition or "mood state" and the congruence of that state with the character's emotional situation also influences comprehension and evaluation of characters (Zillman and Cantor; Potts, et al.). Unfortunately, the live or recorded dimension of characters' emotions and children's comprehension of or emotional response to these feelings has received insufficient attention by media researchers (Dorr; Kase, et al.). These additional factors were considered in the following study.

A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

The present study replicated the *Quixote* study with a different production to describe younger children's "dramatic literacy" and the modal sources for their inferences, including characters' emotions (Klein and Fitch). To test hypotheses, specific objectives were adapted from theatre expectancies in forming aesthetic judgments from the National Curriculum (1987, 61-70).

SUBJECTS

Forty-five 3rd grade children from classrooms in three separate schools within one school district were selected from a small, middle-class midwestern city based upon the willingness of interested principals and teachers. There were 22 girls and 23 boys, mostly Caucasian, whose ages ranged from 8:2 to 10:0 with an average of 9:1.

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THEATRE PRODUCTION

Monkey, Monkey was chosen for its classic literary origins and the availability of younger audiences. This adaptation by Charles Jones (1986) was altered to follow more closely the English translation of the original 16th century Chinese novel entitled *Monkey* by Wu Ch'Eng-En. The production was performed and designed by undergraduate and graduate students under faculty supervision. It ran approximately 50 minutes without intermission. A detailed content analysis of the performance text defined explicit and implicit, verbal and visual features of the production and artistic intentions against which to compare responses (Klein and Fitch 13-22).

Based on earlier findings, the director tested the staging of offstage, verbal information which children tend to miss or ignore in audio-visual stories. In the *Quixote* study, most 5th graders could not identify Dulcinea, an offstage character, even though her identity was explicitly described and mentioned 24 times in the text. In Jones' text of *Monkey*, Zinzue tells Monkey King that the other monkeys have been kidnapped by the Demon of Havoc without ever dramatizing this event. Therefore, the director chose to add a non-verbal scene of the monkeys' kidnapping just before the scene which tells of the event in order to discover whether children would recall the kidnapping or the conversation scene.

This study is limited to 3rd graders' recall of one production of *Monkey, Monkey* and may not be generalized to the greater population. Another production of the same play with other audiences would result in different outcomes.

PROCEDURE

Children were bussed from their schools to the auditorium (seating 1,188) for matinee performances on three different days. All classrooms sat in the center front orchestra about 25 to 30 feet from the proscenium line and 15 feet from the downstage end of the raised orchestra pit (used for the Dragon King scene only).

Individual 15-minute interviews were conducted the day after theatre attendance in separate rooms at respective schools. Three interviewers and their assistants were trained during pilot tests conducted the day after a dress rehearsal. Each interview was audio-recorded for later transcription. Teachers were told not to use study guides until after the interviews to explore untrained responses.

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistical analysis was the primary method used based largely upon the categorization of free responses to open-ended questions. Coding methods reflected the same methods employed in the previous study (1989, 28-32). Interrater reliability ranged from 82% to 99%. One-tailed Pearson correlations were computed on all variables before collapsing them into more general indices.

RESPONSE MEASURES AND RESULTS

1. Children's Evaluations of *Monkey, Monkey*

None of the 45 children was previously familiar with this popular Asian story. When asked to rate how much

3rd graders in another city would enjoy this production, 67% said "a lot," 31% said "a little bit," and one child said "not at all." Almost three-quarters (73%) found this play "sort of easy" or "real easy" to understand, and they attributed this ease rather evenly to the play (42%) or both play and metacognitive factors combined (39%) (e.g., "I understood the meaning of the words").

2. Children's Dramatic Literacy and Their Verbal and Visual Recall

Best Recall

When asked to tell what they remembered best from the play, most children (84%) recalled visualized central dramatic actions (69%) over incidental actions (9%), characters (13%), or spectacle elements (9%). However, 36% did paraphrase or quote dialogue words 17% of the time. As hypothesized, no children recalled Zinzue's conversation with Monkey King; rather, 24% did find the Demon's kidnapping of the monkeys most salient. Of all central dramatic actions, Monkey King's stealing of the Dragon King's weapons captured the most frequent response (24%) by almost half (49%) of the children. (The Dragon King scene began with the raising of the orchestra pit, which may have created an unexpected, memorable surprise toward the play's end.)

Plot Sequencing Task

To test understanding of this play's linear plot structure, children sequenced seven randomly ordered central actions counter-balanced by visual condition ("long-shot" 5 x 7 color photographs) or verbal condition (type-written dialogue pasted on the back and read aloud to them). Cards could be turned over at any time to assist recall, and an assistant recorded turns for each card as an indication of processing behaviors.

When given the verbal condition, 11 children (26%) preferred to sequence their array primarily with photographs instead. Overall, 73% achieved the highest scores possible (between 21 and 18); and, on the average, 59% of their scene placements were correct. Ten children (23%) earned perfect scores—seven in the visual condition and three in the verbal condition. Across all three conditions, children turned to the photographs a little over half of the time (55%), but neither verbal nor visual starting conditions adversely affected sequencing scores to a significant degree.

Main Idea Inferences

Children were asked several open-ended inference questions about the play's themes, the protagonist's superobjective and motive, and three characters' emotions. Most questions were followed by "How do you know?" to determine modal bases for responses.

When asked to infer the "main idea" of the whole play, the majority (75%) did not make spontaneous, abstract, metaphoric connections from the concepts in the play to the world at large. Only one-quarter made accurate inferential leaps by recognizing the script's notion of bravery or self-reliance and by applying notions of good moral behavior (e.g., "people shouldn't steal"). Instead, over half (56%) discussed some concrete aspect

of the Monkey King in particular or all monkeys in general, perhaps because literal, audio-visual representations induce concrete inferences. Nine children (20%) either did not know the main idea or were unable to verbalize it. Children knew the main idea primarily through visual cues (43% of all cues used), particularly Monkey King's dramatic actions ($r = .29, p < .05$), or psychological inferences (30%).

Superobjective Inferences

When asked what Monkey King wanted to *do* during the whole play, 36% gleaned an accurate superobjective by grasping the actor's primary or related intentions of wanting "to live forever," as explicitly stated 5 times in the dialogue (10, 11, 14). Another plurality (42%) felt that he only wanted to go to school to learn in general, or that he wanted to help his monkeys in various ways. Few (7%) thought he wanted personal gain, while others (11%) cited objectives achieved early on in the play. Two children did not know or could not verbalize his superobjective. For the most part, children understood Monkey King's superobjective either through visual cues (44%), primarily his dramatic actions, or through verbal cues (36%), particularly his explicit dialogue ($r = .38, p < .01$). In keeping with the philosophical nature of his superobjective, the more children relied on what he said, the less they needed to rely on his actions ($r = -.26, p < .05$). In fact, children were less likely to state accurately his intention to live forever if they based their inferences primarily on his dramatic actions ($r = -.26, p < .05$).

Motive Inferences

When asked *why* Monkey King wanted to do what they had stated above (his motives), 27% offered a novel notion from their superobjective responses, while almost half (49%) repeated their previous superobjective ideas ($r = .32, p < .05$). Seven children (16%) did not know or could not verbalize his motives.

While 3rd graders are known to have difficulty inferring motives, acting theory provides a possible explanation for their repetitions of Monkey King's motives (past causes of behavior) with his superobjective (future intentions of behavior). Every dramatic action (effect) is the result of a preceding action (cause). From an actor's perspective, characters behave purposefully in future-oriented ways by seeking "to win victories" or objectives throughout the play based on their situations at any given moment. Therefore, rather than ask "why" a character behaves as he does (past causes), actors must ask "what for?" (i.e., "for what anticipated result") from a first-person perspective (Cohen 35). Yet when viewing plays from a third-person perspective, audiences see and hear those intended results, some of which occurred in earlier parts of the play (now in the past, so to speak). Therefore, while superobjectives and motives are two distinctly separate concepts for actors, they appear to be identical to audiences, especially to child audiences who are asked to reflect back (into the past) on the play as a whole.

As a result, responses to Monkey King's motives appeared somewhat circular. Twenty-four percent correctly recognized that Monkey King behaved as he did primarily because he wanted to live forever. These children were most accurate in inferring his motive when they

relied on his explicit dialogue ($r = .46, p < .01$) rather than his dramatic actions ($r = -.43, p < .01$) to infer his superobjective. Another 22% attributed his intended behaviors to helping his monkeys, while 18% believed his motives were purely for reasons of personal gain or enjoyment. The remaining five children stated less accurate motives. Overall, responses reflected how children themselves would think if confronted by these situations, especially in regard to family, school, and peer relationships.

Character Affect Inferences

Though characters' facial expressions were disguised or non-existent in this production, children comprehended characters' emotions well by basing their inferences on visual cues, vocal tones, and contextual causes and consequences. Forty-two percent correctly identified all three characters' emotions. When asked how the (masked) Dragon King felt after Monkey King stole the wishing staff and weapons, 73% found him angry, using both visual (35%) and verbal/aural (39%) cues, primarily his tone of voice ($r = .26, p < .05$). When asked how Yama (the eyelid puppet) felt after Monkey King erased the names from the scroll, 64% found her (or him') to be angry as well, primarily through verbal/aural cues (38%). When asked how Monkey King (wearing animal makeup) felt when the Jade Emperor yelled at and punished him at the end of the play, 78% reported that he felt sad or "sorry." Here, they used visual (29%), verbal/aural (25%), psychological (25%), and contextual (21%) means almost equally.

Aural Recall and What Children Reported Learning

To test listening skills further, children were asked to recall what Kerchin *said* he and the other monkeys learned from the Monkey King. Here, 27% accurately remembered the essence of his explicit dialogue ("You have taught us to be brave and to trust ourselves" 24). Another 38% remembered inaccurately, and 35% could not remember at all. A follow-up question asking what children had learned from the play revealed that over half (53%) reported learning the concept of trusting oneself or good moral behaviors. Another 29% gleaned more concrete information about monkeys or Monkey King in particular. The remaining 18% either could not remember learning anything or said they learned nothing. Of the 26 children who were asked how they learned the above concepts, 22% cited the consequences of Monkey King's actions (e.g., his punishment or separation from his family), 26% reported identifying with his character in various ways, and 24% cited other dramatic actions.

Children who inferred the play's main idea accurately also remembered Kerchin's dialogue accurately (essentially the main idea) ($r = .44, p < .01$). Their main idea inferences were related to what they remembered of Kerchin's dialogue ($r = .48, p < .001$), and the concepts they reported learning ($r = .33, p < .05$).

Relationships Between Modal Bases

Contrary to expectations, these 3rd graders relied on visual (33%), verbal/aural (32%), and psychological and contextual cues (35%) almost equally, when asked for the modal bases used in making inferences. As in the

Quixote study, the more children used visual cues, the more they also used verbal cues ($r = .43$, $p < .001$) and psychological cues ($r = .36$, $p < .01$). Furthermore, the more children used verbal cues, the easier they rated their comprehension of the play ($r = -.43$, $p < .001$), and they attributed this ease to the play itself over their own cognitive efforts ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). Likewise, those who used fewer verbal cues to make inferences rated the play harder to understand. Finally, the more children used verbal cues, the higher their level of general comprehension ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). Like 5th graders in the *Quixote* study, the more these 3rd graders integrated all three modes (visual, verbal/aural, psychological/contextual) in their cognitive processing, the easier they rated their understanding of the play ($r = -.36$, $p < .01$, and the more they attributed this ease to the play itself ($r = .25$, $p < .05$). As might be expected, the more children integrated all modes of processing, the more they reported learning the major intended concepts of the play ($r = .57$, $p < .001$), particularly when they relied on concrete visual and verbal/aural cues as staged in this production (respectively $r = .42$, $p < .01$; $r = .58$, $p < .001$).

3. Children's Preferential Reasons for Theatre over Television

Finally, given a chance to see *Monkey, Monkey* again, 3rd graders said they would prefer to watch it in a theatre (78%) than on television (22%), primarily for its "more real" live values (39%) ($r = .38$, $p < .01$). It is interesting to note that the same percentage of 5th graders in the *Quixote* study preferred theatre to television, and they cited the same reason for this choice. Those who preferred television did so primarily for this medium's greater home comfort and viewer control ($r = -.43$, $p < .01$). Children who preferred theatre over television stated that 3rd graders in another city would enjoy this production "a lot" ($r = .24$, $p < .01$). They also used more verbal/aural cues ($r = .44$, $p < .001$) when processing inferences about the play, and they integrated all three modes of processing to a greater extent than those who preferred television ($r = .32$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

These results contrast with 5th graders who relied heavily on visual cues (63%) over verbal/aural (15%) and psychological cues (21%) regarding *Quixote*. Comparisons between grade levels and plays can be made very cautiously if two of the same questions used are separated to remove skewness. As shown in Table 1, both 3rd and 5th graders based their inferences about their play's main idea primarily on what they saw visually, while also drawing psychological implications. On the other hand, modal bases for superobjective inferences were skewed on the basis of each respective text. Because Don Quixote did not state his superobjective directly, 5th graders based his superobjective on his visual actions. By contrast, because *Monkey King* verbalized his superobjective explicitly, 3rd graders not only based their inferences on his visual actions, but they also merely repeated his dialogue as heard. Therefore, while it is tempting to conclude that these 3rd graders were better listeners than the older 5th grade audience, the more accurate truth lies in the old-worn adage, "The play is the thing."

Table 1. Percentages of Total Modal Bases Used for Main Idea and Superobjective Only.

Bases	Main Idea		Super-objective		Totals	
	DQ	MM	DQ	MM	DQ	MM
Visual	.47	.43	.60	.44	.55	.44
Verbal	.16	.13	.19	.36	.18	.27
Psych	.31	.29	.21	.19	.24	.24
Unscorable	.06	.13	(0)	(0)	.03	.05
DK*	.22	.40	.09	.11		

*DK represents the percentages of children who did not know the play's main idea or superobjective and/or how they knew these concepts.

Considering the nature of children's inferences and how they understood *Monkey, Monkey*, it appears that this audience sample both watched and listened carefully. Children's enjoyment of the play and their preference for theatre over television may also suggest high attention levels during the performance—a factor which is likely to influence comprehension and recall.

Comparing interview responses to theatre objectives in the National Drama/Theatre Curriculum, most 3rd graders either met or exceeded expectations for their grade level by expressing and sharing their perceptions of this theatrical experience (with a stranger no less). Over half to three-quarters of the children were able to recognize and identify central dramatic actions, the sequential order of the plot, and characters' emotions. Roughly one-third were able to recognize, identify, interpret, or, in some cases, analyze character actions, objectives, and motives when asked to do so directly. They exhibited excellent levels of "dramatic literacy" by describing explicit dramatic actions and dialogue, in particular, and by translating those performance cues into verbal statements and psychological inferences—ironically, in almost imitative, "monkey-like" fashion. Over one-third of the children were also able to recognize and identify a major difference between theatre and television—that is, theatre's live values. Children also identified other similarities and differences, while some were able to compare conventions between the two media.

The only area of weakness lies in children's failure to make spontaneous metaphoric connections from the fictive world of *Monkey, Monkey* to their personal lives and the world at large. This may be due, in part, to children's confusion or inability to recognize or discuss the "main ideas" in plays. The fact that children were not asked to abstract connections directly may also restrict these findings (e.g., "Does the *Monkey King* remind you of anyone you know?"). Nevertheless, over half of the children reported learning the major concepts and themes of this play, suggesting an ability to grasp main ideas depending on how questions are phrased.

Comprehension levels compared favorably with the artistic intentions of the director, performers, and designers, and in some cases, individual responses exceeded expectations. Contrary to the findings in the *Quixote* study, it would appear that children *do listen* to plays as much as they watch them, as long as the dialogue informs and reinforces each subsequent dramatic action throughout the performance. Like 5th graders, the more these 3rd graders relied on visual cues, the more they listened

to dialogue and vocal inflections to increase their inference-making efforts. Likewise, the more they integrated all available cues in the production, the more they reported learning the symbolic concepts of this play with easier levels of understanding.

In general, the *Quixote* performance text relied heavily on implicit actions and dialogue to communicate its major themes, while the *Monkey* text contained more explicit dialogue about its universal messages and more frequent central dramatic actions to support those themes in its plot structure. Therefore, children's ability to draw inferences about characters, events, and the main ideas of plays depends on whether or not key abstract ideas are presented implicitly or explicitly via aural and visual cues. In other words, what children see and hear is precisely what they retain best.

The results of this theatre study could inform the debate concerning the visual superiority hypothesis in television research. Studies consistently reveal that when given a choice between visual and auditory modes, children prefer to process stories visually, especially at younger ages, and visual presentation can either increase or decrease comprehension levels (e.g., Hayes and Birnbaum 1980). However, as the present study demonstrates, the given stimulus determines the nature of how it is processed. The use of televised stories without systematic content analyses have confounded results of many media studies. Essentially, the central issue is whether or not the visual and auditory modes within a stimulus reinforce, highlight, contradict, or distract from one another in presenting central dramatic actions and critical story information (Calvert, et al.). The nature of the comprehension task also determines the modality used in cognitive processing (Bryant and Anderson). Story information will be recalled visually or aurally, depending on its initial visual or auditory presentation, the child's encoding at the time of the presentation, and the modality through which it is later retrieved. For example, comprehension abilities are challenged when visual information (e.g., dramatic actions) is retrieved visually in the mind's eye (or imagination) and then translated in verbal or propositional form during an oral interview (Kosslyn 416).

Children's frequent use of dialogue and aural cues in this study may be explained by the fact that verbal and aural information was necessary to answer inference questions regarding Monkey King's superobjective, the effect of three, "face-less" characters, and aural recall of explicit dialogue. Still, it may well be that live performers in theatre induce greater attention to spoken dialogue and vocal inflections without the visual distractions of television's camera conventions. The fact that children who preferred theatre over television tended to use and integrate more verbal cues in their cognitive processing provides minimal support for this hypothesis. Until theatre and television are compared directly using analogous story versions, theories regarding key differences in comprehension between these two media will remain speculative.

APPLICATIONS TO TEACHING AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Elementary teachers can increase students' critical thinking skills by asking curricular questions about drama

and theatre elements to form aesthetic judgments. To combat the tendency to draw inferences from only concrete audio-visual information, teachers might also encourage students to look for similarities and differences between characters in given situations and students' personal lives as indications of how theatre represents the universal human condition.

The individual oral interview, visual tasks, and coding system used in these two theatre studies have been effective methods for assessing children's "dramatic literacy" of plays in performance. Asking "How do you know?" as a follow-up to inference questions challenges children's metacognitive abilities and provides useful feedback regarding the communicative effect of performances. As more school districts and state mandates in arts education require theatre assessments, such open-ended, prototypical questions and methods can reveal more informative, qualitative responses than standardized written, forced-choice tests.

Additional questions may be raised for future research: (1) How do children make meaning of "unreal," fictive human conditions in "real," live theatre productions? (2) What realities (fictional and actual) do they perceive and construct? (3) Do children believe the fictional realities of plays based on what they actually see and hear, or do they see and hear fictional worlds based on what they already know and believe in the real world? (4) Do child audiences view a play from an actor's subjective, first-person perspective (like a television camera's simulation), or are they locked into an objective, third-person perspective by the "democratic" nature of theatre viewing? (5) Should theatre artists induce children to make spontaneous metaphoric connections from the fictive play to the real world by designing and staging more explicit analogies to children's lives?

Theatre producers have a responsibility to keep child audiences returning to the theatre as adults. Knowledge about these audiences should come from the voices of children themselves, rather than solely from the speculations of well-meaning adult artists and educators. Though children sometimes lack the verbal capacity to report their complete understanding and appreciation of theatre, researchers can employ numerous qualitative methods to ease these inherent problems. By interviewing small groups of children individually, educators and theatre producers alike may assess more closely the success (or failure) of specific theatre productions in engaging children's hearts and minds.

NOTE

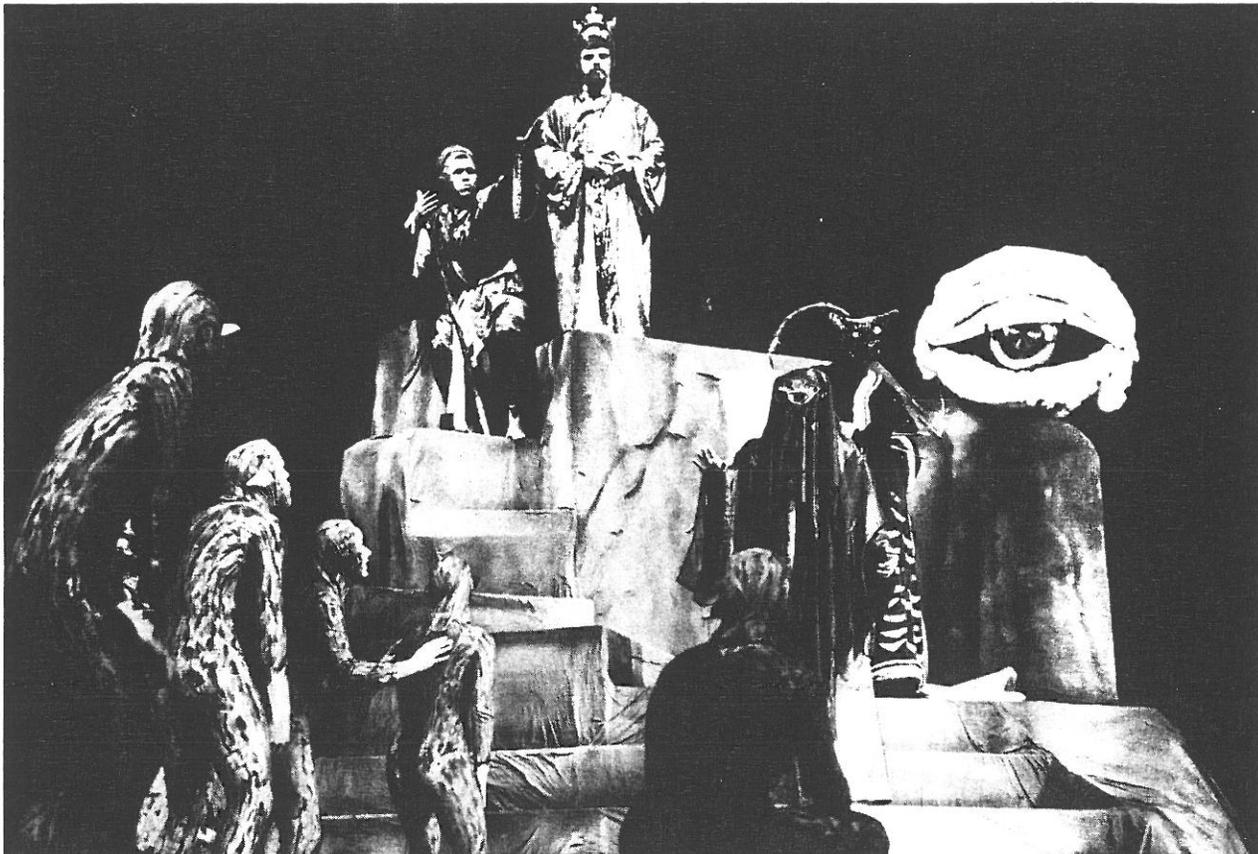
1. Though Yama was referred to as the "King of Death" four times in the text (10, 11, 14, 16), this character was vocalized by a female puppeteer. In roughly equal proportions, both girls and boys used the male pronoun over half the time (51%) and the female pronoun a third of the time (16% did not refer to any sex).

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