

Questions of Reality: A Review of the Play *Through the Reading Glasses*

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When I started reading this play I was glad that, only a few days before, I had read an abridged version of *Alice in Wonderland* to my daughter as a bedtime story. I was instantly comfortable recognising characters, such as Con and Div, who are loosely based on Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee from Lewis Carroll's classic. I couldn't work out whether the Help Avatar was supposed to resemble the Caterpillar or the Cheshire Cat, but it didn't matter, as the parallels with Wonderland faded away and I became more deeply engaged with the "real" story of the Professor and his journey *Through the Reading Glasses* (TTRG).

Creating characters similar to those familiar to the audience is a useful device with which to draw an audience in to the world of a play – extremely effective in this case. From the first few lines, we are guided as to the kind of experiences we will encounter and can relax into it.

One of the themes raised in TTRG is that of "knowing your audience". In the play, we are compelled to question who our work is for. Academics follow a set of rules about which, it appears, only they really care. We ask, does anyone ever read the books and articles that academics so painstakingly prepare and, even if they do, aren't the readers already the "converted"? I chuckled when the character Art suggested that continuous exposure to the riddles of convergence (Con) and divergence (Div), dominated by rules, was "a fate worse than death", one that the Professor needed rescuing from. This resonated with me, as it sometimes seems safer to hide behind layers (or riddles) of "academic" complexity, rather than face what is truly relevant in today's world. If no-one reads books any more and people only want cat videos, why do we continue expressing ourselves through the written word? Is there another way to influence?

The virtual reality game works well as a physical manifestation of looking and seeing things differently. Most of us interested in understanding organisations are aware that we have multiple perspectives available to us, but may not use them frequently enough or to the fullest extent. Two realities begin to interweave showing us it may be possible to "keep the glasses on" when returning to our familiar environments. We should embrace the opportunity to view situations through different lenses and welcome any changes this engenders. If we are not questioning, learning and challenging ourselves to new methods of expression, perhaps we are standing still.

In the third quarter of the play, everything begins to unravel. The dialogue becomes quick-fire in short sentences, with everybody talking over one another. Amidst this chaos, we see the stakes rise and characters engage with a new candour, recognised in the statement "some honest expression of emotion". We feel a squirming discomfort as the Professor struggles to recalibrate after his virtual reality experience. But a good story

needs discomfort: the greater the discord, the more powerful the cadence (if indeed it happens). When watching the video of a live performance, I was surprised to find that I could sense how the physical audience shared the discomfort. There was a noticeable restlessness amongst the assembled group and, even though I was watching from thousands of miles away and months later, I felt people “checking out” and some even shuffled away from the performance area. This prompted me to wonder why the audience were there at all, and what else they could be doing at that time.

As if to “rescue” us, the character Alice employs another clever device, a “time-switch”; interrupting the action and re-winding the play so we can experience an alternative ending. The reprisal of the Prof’s hilarious rendition of his solo number re-engages us with the action (NB: this was not so effective when reading the written script). In the live performance, the actors shuffled backwards to indicate the time-switch / rewind effect. This worked well to lead the audience on the journey, although the staging of the section where the virtual and real worlds intertwined felt awkward, most likely due to the difficulty of acting whilst reading a script, and with very little rehearsal.

The last theme I will mention in this review is what the playwright refers to as “crossing the line”. Alice realises that her “user experience” has emotionally affected the research participant (who also happens to be her PhD supervisor), reflected in the line “you’ve had a rough time with the glasses” (p. 26). An ethic of care is relevant to all of us when carrying out experimental research and the brief acknowledgement of this added yet more resonance to a well structured piece.

Towards the end, there is a glimmer of romance between the two central protagonists, Alice and the Professor, and the true identity of the “princess” is discussed. I felt disappointed, as this new twist threatened to derail the more interesting plot-line about the Professor’s personal transformation. I worried for a moment that the play might be cheapened by issues of love and sex. Thanks to the “time switch” device, the potential romance does not have a chance to develop, although the final scene leaves us wondering whether these two characters might choose a path involving a deeper relationship (NB: this did not come through so strongly in the recording as when reading the script). More interesting to me was the moment in which the Professor is pressed to consider his existing relationships earlier in the piece, at which point he admits that work is his true love. The degree to which we become emotionally involved with our work is a choice we should all be responsible for.

The end of *TTRG* arrived suddenly, slightly too suddenly for my liking, leaving some questions unresolved. It was the brevity of the ending that concerned me rather than the imperfect cadence. Although we are satisfied that a moment of harmony has been reached, the story could go on without us and there are myriad possible paths it could take. I was comfortable with this “unknown” but wished the final tension between the two protagonists could have been held for just a few seconds more. Perhaps even some musical motif to signify the end might have helped the audience to depart the world of the play more smoothly.

Throughout this play, questions abound: Who needs to be rescued? From what? Is *learning* our rescue? Does it matter if no-one reads our books? Why do we submit to rules? What would happen if we didn’t? If we choose to keep the glasses on, will people think we are insane, and if they do, does that matter? Theatre prompts questions. A well-crafted play makes the audience reflect on their own condition, challenging their choices, and *TTRG* certainly achieved this for me. This reviewer’s opinion will not make or break a commercial production. Unless this play is staged again at another similar event, readers may not have the opportunity to see it performed live. It is, however, well worth a read and, like I, the reader may then enjoy watching the first performance online, forming their own questions, and having their own unique experience of going *Through the Reading Glasses*.