



The Play's the Thing

Text: Verner Bickley

A play is the story of a selected group of characters, their relationships and intimacies, their conversations and deeds. It is a story that may be read in privacy or in public but its main purpose is for presentation to an audience. Wherever a play is performed, the audience, in one sense, become part of the play. In recent months, we have been both speaker/actors and members of an audience. We have enjoyed reading plays by writers such as Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), J.B. Barrie (*The Admirable Crichton*), Agatha Christie (*The Rats*), Yasmina Reza (*Art*), Anton Chekhov (*The Proposal*) and (selections from) Richard Via (*English in Three Acts*).

English in Three Acts is particularly interesting because it focuses on the teaching of English through drama, an approach that has now been recognised by the Hong Kong Education Bureau. In an interesting Foreword, Dr. Mark Lester draws attention to Via's careful application of the techniques of teaching acting and dramatisation to the classroom teaching of English. He then goes on to comment briefly on the general motivation for using drama in the language classroom. 1. Drama allows the student

to use natural, conversational English in a meaningful context. 2. A play demands that the actors participate in new cultural roles and behave in a culturally acceptable way. 3. Drama provides a purposeful, highly motivating classroom activity for intermediate and advanced level students.

Lester considers that Via's approach to the teaching of English is really double-barrelled: the play provides one kind of exposure to the natural communicative use of language while the use of English in the preparation of the play provides a second kind.

All the plays mentioned above and, indeed, all plays, are fictions conceived in the minds of playwrights; the writers who choose the characters who people their plays. The ideas and incidents that govern such plays invariably illuminate and reveal central themes and purposes. In each play, some parts may be of greater importance than others; some characters and incidents might stand out more clearly in the designs; but no part may be greater than the whole. The plays the thing which has to be given life in a theatre.

"The play's the thing." We use this quotation from Shakespeare's play, *Hamlet* in our advance notices simply to draw attention to the purpose of our play-reading evenings – to give our members and friends the opportunity to read, understand and enjoy a wide variety of plays.

Of course, Hamlet meant something quite different when he said, "the play's the thing." Those who are familiar with this great work of literature and drama will remember that a play is to be performed before Hamlet's uncle, King Claudius. Hamlet's idea is to add some lines to the play about murder (an excerpt from, *The Murder of Gonzago*), hoping that Claudius (the murderer) will be disturbed and reveal himself. The plan works and an agitated Claudius leaves the room angry and "marvellous distemp'ed".

Do come to our monthly play-readings. We guarantee that you will not leave the Arts Centre like Claudius, "marvellous distemp'ed".

Reference

1. Richard A. Via, *English in Three Acts*, A Culture Learning Institute

Monograph, East-West Center, The University Press of Hawaii, 1976.

English Play-reading

Play-reading is part of the monthly cultural events co-organised by The Bookshop and the English Speaking Union. Please refer to The Bookshop blog and future notices for upcoming exhibitions.

The Bookshop

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Please refer to p.40 for English Play-reading details.

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