

Constructing Meaning in Silence: A Phenomenological Study of Audience Response to the Play *Request Sa Radyo*

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The Kyoto Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This phenomenological study explores how audiences from the University of Makati interpret and respond to the play *Request sa Radyo*, a non-traditional theatrical Filipino adaptation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's *Wunschkonzert*. The one-woman performance was staged without dialogue, relying on ambient sound and symbolic actions, and challenges conventional narrative expectations. Featuring portrayals by Lea Salonga and Dolly de Leon, the play examines the personal world of an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) struggling with emotional isolation and routine. Through semi-structured interviews with UMak students and employees, the study investigates how prior expectations, cultural background, and lived experiences shape meaning-making. Findings reveal that audience reactions vary widely, ranging from disengagement to profound emotional resonance based on familiarity with the actors, exposure to unconventional theater, and personal connections to OFWs. The study draws on the interpretivist tradition and Mumby's Discourse of Representation to analyze how silence, repetition, and performer identity mediate understanding. The paper concludes that experimental theater can cultivate deeper emotional insight when audiences are prepared to engage symbolically, suggesting the value of pre-and post-performance contextualization in educational or culturally complex stage productions.

Keywords: theater, silence phenomenological, *Request Sa Radyo*

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Introduction

This study explores how audiences make meaning of a non-traditional theater performance titled *Request sa Radyo*, a one-woman, dialogue-free play that portrays the life of an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) navigating isolation, routine, and emotional distress. The play is an adaptation of the German play *Wunschkonzert* (Request Program) by Franz Xaver Kroetz. The character was portrayed by two celebrated Filipino actors: Lea Salonga, renowned for her extraordinary singing career and success in Broadway, and Dolly de Leon, who is now gaining international recognition for her nuanced dramatic work.

The production team transformed the 1,520-seating capacity of the Samsung Performing Arts Theater into a limited 400-seat arrangement, creating a more intimate experience between the set and the audience. Upon entering the theater, spectators were greeted by a striking stage setup: a functional, studio-type living space situated at the center. The working set amplified the realism of the character's routines and allowed audiences to witness every facial expression and movement with precision, deepening their engagement.

The performance challenges traditional expectations by eliminating verbal communication and relying instead on physical expression and ambient sound from a Filipino radio station. Audience members, particularly those familiar with Ms. Salonga's musical background were prepared to watch a vocal or musical performance. This expectation was subverted, particularly by Salonga's silent portrayal, which prompted reflection on the boundaries of her craft.

This research is rooted in the phenomenological tradition and draws on the Discourse of Representation to understand how audiences interpret the symbols, silence, and actions presented during the performance. It is especially interested in how prior expectations, emotional associations, and lived experiences shape interpretation. The inquiry arose from observing a mixed reaction among UMa audiences, some were deeply moved, others confused or in total disengagement despite experiencing the same performance environment.

Statement of the Problem

Theater as a communicative art form thrives on interaction between performance and audience. When a production breaks traditional conventions such as using silence in place of dialogue or removing a clear narrative arc it challenges audiences to participate in meaning-making differently. In the case of the play *Request sa Radyo*, many audience members appeared uncertain or even alienated by its form, suggesting a gap in interpretive access. This study investigates how such formal elements influence emotional and cognitive engagement, particularly among a university-based Filipino audience.

Even though there are previous studies on Philippine Theater it is often focused on production design, lived experiences of actors and performances on socio-political themes. Meanwhile there is no inquiry into how audiences make sense of productions specifically in unconventional theater such as "*Request sa Radyo*". Using silence as the central element in expressing the meaning of performance has been widely discussed in global context. This paper would like to address these gaps by offering a phenomenological understanding of how Filipino viewers engage with the absence of word in a performance.

Research Objectives

1. To explore how UMak audiences interpret and respond to the non-traditional elements of *Request sa Radyo*
2. To identify how expectations (e.g., celebrity actors, traditional forms) shape the viewing experience
3. To understand how symbolic actions and silence are received and interpreted
4. To examine how cultural background and personal connections influence emotional resonance of the performance

Research Question

For my main research question, I asked the participants to explain how as part of the UMak audiences interpret and respond to the non-traditional elements (absence of dialogue, One-Woman Performance, Use of Ambient Sound [Radio] as Background, Lack of Clear Story Arc, Themes of Mental Health and Isolation Depicted Non-Verbally) of the theatrical performance *Request sa Radyo*?

And for the sub-questions, the researcher asked the following below:

1. How do audience members describe their emotional and cognitive responses to the absence of dialogue in the play?
2. How do prior expectations, such as familiarity with the actors or traditional theater forms, influence audience interpretation of the performance?
3. How do audience members construct meaning from symbolic elements such as the radio, routine, or the character's final act?
4. What cultural or personal experiences shape how UMak employees and students relate to the story of the OFW character?

Theoretical Framework: Interpretivism and the Discourse of Representation

This research is grounded in the interpretivist epistemological tradition, which assumes that reality and meaning are socially constructed through individual and cultural lenses. Interpretivism allows us to understand how different viewers extract meaning based on their personal context, emotions, and past experiences.

The study is further supported by the Discourse of Representation, part of Mumby's (2011) Discursive Framework. This discourse focuses on how formal elements of a text or performance structure audience understanding. In the play *Request sa Radyo*, the absence of dialogue, use of ambient sound, and repetitive actions create a specific mode of representation that demands an active audience role. These choices guide, limit, or enhance the interpretive possibilities available to viewers. These unusual presentation triggers an internal discourse among the audience creating a mixed discussion whether the staging of the adaptation was worth the watch.

Methodology

Research Design

This is a qualitative phenomenological study. A phenomenological approach allows for the deep exploration of lived experiences, particularly how meaning is constructed by individuals encountering a particular event or stimulus. It discovers how people interpret meanings and application to the thoughts of an idea or program. In this study, phenomenology supplies a way to comprehend the subjective reactions and interpretive processes of audience members as they engage with an unconventional theatrical performance. Rather than measuring reactions through fixed variables, this approach values the nuanced, emotional, and reflective insights shared by participants. It is particularly suited to the nature of the play *Request sa Radyo*, which does not follow the conventional narrative structures and instead, it relies on the symbolic gestures and non-verbal cues of the actor to convey meaning. By centering the voices and lived experiences of the viewers, this approach sheds light on how meaning is co-created between the performer and the audience in the absence of traditional storytelling techniques we usually see in a stage production.

Participants

Five individuals from the UMak community were interviewed, representing a mix of students, staff, and faculty. Participants were selected purposively, based on having attended the play. To supplement this data, informal reactions and short reviews shared by UMak viewers on social media and online forums were reviewed to confirm thematic patterns.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted shortly after the viewing. Each session lasted 20–30 minutes and was guided by open-ended questions addressing emotional reactions, interpretive challenges, and personal connections. Secondary data included observational notes taken during the performances.

Ethical Considerations

Verbal consent was obtained from all participants. Identities were anonymized, and participation was voluntary. The researcher clarified the purpose of the study and emphasized that there were no right or wrong responses.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews and observations were coded thematically. Recurring patterns were identified across responses to each of the four sub-questions. Themes were then analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework to understand how representation and subjectivity influenced interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

Form as Barrier or Bridge

Since there is a mixed of noob and theater savvy among the participants, they saw the performance differently. Those unaccustomed to unconventional theater stated confusion and frustration while watching the play. However, frequent theater goers saw the silence as emotionally powerful and thought provoking.

Expectation vs. Experience

The familiarity with the actors shaped the expectations of the participants upon entering the theater. They initially look forward to watching Lea Salonga in her element which is musical or heavy monologue performances. The silence while portraying the character and the absence of usual theater story-telling surprised and even disappointed the audience members. This shows that there is a contrast between the expectations and the experience of the audience members.

Different Takes on Silence and Symbolism

Symbolic gestures of actors, like the repeated routines and small movements, carried strong meaning for the audience. Washing clothes, cleaning the same spot over and over, cooking dinner and nitpicking the art piece she created are simple acts that showed the character's need for control while navigating her life lonely in a foreign country. Participants even linked these actions to signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), reflecting her struggle to cope with isolation. While the only sound throughout the play came from a Filipino radio that plays songs, ads, and greetings it made the character felt that it is her way of staying connected to home. Viewers also noted how her mood shifted along with the radio's tone, she moved more freely and danced when the music was upbeat and when the DJ introduces mellow songs, she became distant. Together, the gestures and radio created a rhythm that made the silence feel heavier and more emotional, showing how simple routines can speak louder than words.

Emotional Resonance Through Lived Experience

There are also participants with family members working abroad found the character's behavior deeply familiar. The silence and gestures reminded them of the emotional weight OFWs carry, often unspoken and unnoticed. Some even called their relatives abroad to check on them. The emotional attachment of OFW family members was deeply emphasized with heavy but real scenarios that were usually taken for granted by relatives.

This shows that Filipinos are emotional in nature relating to how the cultural and familial context of the play enhances meaning-making within the participants. The effect of the production to the live audience were observable having some of them with tearful eyes and worrisome feeling for their relatives abroad.

Theoretical Insights

These findings reinforce Mumby's (2021) Discourse of Representation in analyzing how performance choices guide meaning-making. *Request sa Radyo* does not offer direct narratives found in a usual performance; instead, it invites audiences to project, interpret, and emotionally

work through gestures and atmosphere. The interpretivist approach clarifies why interpretations differ: viewers bring their own cultural memory, expectations, and theater literacy into the meaning-making process. This shows how audiences may influence future work in theater.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study highlights the layered process of audience engagement in nonconventional theater. The play *Request sa Radyo* elicits a wide range of responses shaped by audiences' prior knowledge, personal experience, and openness to formal abstraction. These insights offer valuable implications for artists, producers, and cultural educators. Productions dealing with complex social themes may benefit from pre-performance orientations or post-show discussions to bridge interpretive gaps.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my professor for the guidance, feedback, and support provided throughout the completion of this paper. I am also deeply thankful to all the participants who willingly shared their time and insights, which made this study possible. My passion for theatre arts has been the driving force behind choosing this topic, and this project has strengthened my appreciation for the field and its relevance in understanding human experiences.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I have used AI assisted technology to look for terminologies and for the checking of the flow of this paper.

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