

111111 The MIT Press

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Source: *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Anniversary Issue: Dreams, Proposals, Manifestos (Winter, 1983), pp. 43-46

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145540>

Accessed: 10/05/2014 10:13

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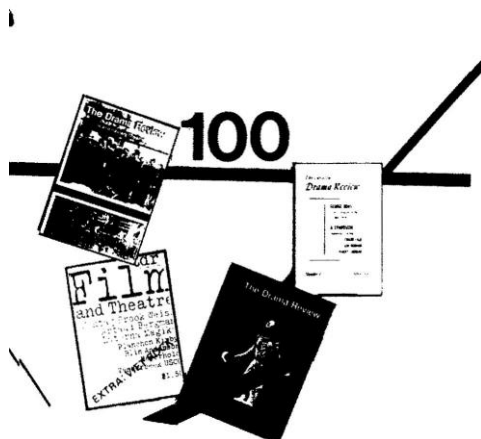
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Chris Hardman:



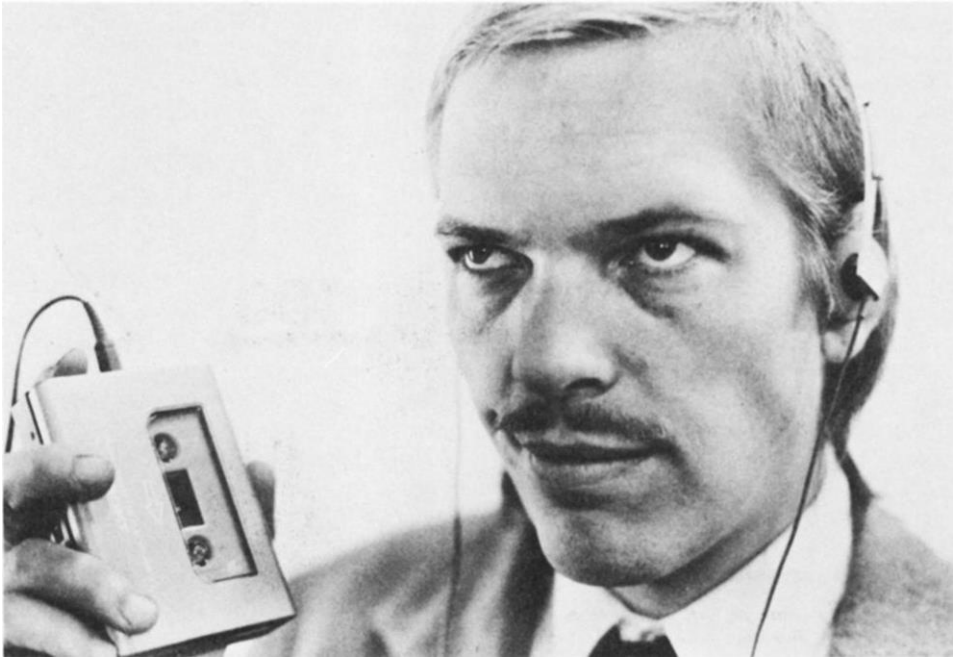
Walkmanology

The walkman is the backbone of a new kind of theatrical experience.

I bought my first walkman stereo cassette player just before embarking on Antenna's 1980 European tour of *Vacuum*. I bought it to replace listening to airplane muzak. I also hoped it would amuse during queue-ups and fill the pompous silences that engulf museums and cathedrals. It performed these tricks miraculously. While others were draped in reverence, bewilderment, or boredom, I was in rapture combining Wagner with Kohn's cathedral and baroque trumpets with Parisian streets. I inspected Europe while privately-electronically-stereophonically listening to its musical heritage. I also began to contemplate the theatrical ramifications of this latest weapon in the entertainment arsenal.

Upon returning to California I started my walkman experiments and having completed three to *date* — *High School*, *Pink Prom* and *Artery* — Antenna Theater is speculating on the future of walkmanology. Our report:

In this theatre of the future, you, as the audient, will clip on a radio transceiver no larger than a saltine cracker and plug it into your ear speaker-phones so small that only the wires may be noticeable as they drop down your neck and jack into the radio. By digital encoding/decoding, your unit will be able to pick up its own discreet channel and yet all the units will be perfectly synchronized. Information will be transmitted from one



central source so there will be no time discrepancies due to motor speed and/or tape stretch as is the case with currently available walkmans.

A sample future performance would begin as your pretaped intervoice asks you to step through a red door and start walking down a hall. Soon you're approached by a humanoid; it could be a hologram, an actor, or a fellow audient. You hear him talk to you over your tape. The hall is now full of beings and the sound grows deafening. Your intervoice asks you to step through a side door and you are alone. You watch snatches of a video tape, you search the room, you change clothes. Suddenly a man bursts in with a drawn knife. You are given a choice: join or fight. Your decision determines your play: the mother computer triggers either the fight or the join tape and the play continues. Perhaps next you'll be asked to engage in Hesse-like games of chance or feats of skill. Each decision or result will determine the next step in your adventure.

Now beyond the techno-wizardry of bionics and holographics, the essential difference between this theatrical vision and most present-day theatre is the position of the audience. Released from the spectator's box, the audient struts the stage, and on the stage each audient becomes a separate point of perception with his own private audio-guide. And what a guide: instead of the narrator emoting from the distant edge of the proscenium, this intervoice is inside your head. It's an intimate muse that entices you to come out and play. Just push play.

Now some will say this sounds like Big Brotherism— but entertainment has continually invented new systems to bring the audience into the action. In movie houses we've worn cardboard 3D glasses and sniffed smell-o-ramas, we've been surrounded by split screens and quad sounds. In live theatres we've had stages thrust at us and sat in the round;

we've been surrounded by actors and even had them leap out of the seat next to us. All are attempts at delivering to audiences the experience of entering through a looking-glass, down a twilight zone via the time machine.

My first walkman experiment, *High School*—produced in Summer 1981 for the Bay Area Playwrights Festival—was a site-specific location walk-through, somewhat like a self-guided museum tour. In *High School*, the guide was a fast-talking kid and the place was his former high school. He talked you through the boy's bathroom, the lockers, the auto shop and the dope hangouts. You walked a mile-long white line while skateboarders rolled by, girls primped and guys fought. It happened at night in an eerie atmosphere created by the audio-visual juxtaposition of walking down dimly lit, empty halls, while hearing lockers slamming, text books dropping and students racing by —and seeing almost no one.

In *High School*, the audient experienced the show as a guest. Antenna's next walkman experiment actively involved some of the guests in the performance. Sticking with the location motif and again with the Playwright's Festival, I staged a prom, *Pink Prom*, in July 1982. Interoice tapes for 11 promsters and promettes were recorded along with a master tape composed of interviews with high school girls after prom night that everyone could hear. All tapes were started at the same time and for the next 45 minutes our first synchronized, walkman-activated performers performed.

Antenna's third and most recent walkman theatre piece is *Artery*, which opened in Marin County in December 1982, and went on tour. In *Artery*, the audient, wearing a walkman and following the taped story/instructions, passes through a maze-like set composed of 20 rooms/environments. Each audient plays an active role in the unfolding drama of crime and romance: breaking and entering, motel fantasy, flight from retribution.

Between these Antenna experiments and the future walkman theatre there is a myriad of possible permutations. For instance, how about "radio-active" theatre where the story and instructions are broadcast into your home. How about performances in other places where standard audiences can't possibly gather (you drive a car, climb a fire escape and end up in a dingy apartment). How about an argument: You play one character ultimately becoming aware of the adversary's innermost thoughts. How about a labyrinthian show in which you choose a new tape at frequent points of decision. How about a standard proscenium play with a cast of hundreds, all audients. Audients performing for an audience.

This equation, audient = actor, requires some new language and the refinement of an old one. The stage directions, once shared between director and performer and never heard, now serve as underpinning of the entire text. The parameters of this instructional language must be figured out. There are some severe restrictions. For instance, actors rehearse, audients don't. Whatever they are asked to do must be instantly understandable to a significant cross-section of the populace. After *Pink Prom*, one young audient asked what "goose-stepping" is. Maybe "goose-stepping" has slipped out of the language whereas acting like a robot or Groucho is definitely still in.

One might also expect that a severe case of stage fright could break out but Antenna's experience so far is that no one has frozen. Maybe because there is no fear of failure: You can't forget your lines, they're all on the tape; you're not responsible for your performance, you're just doing a job. But how far can this be pushed? How close to taboo-crashing can one get? Will people stop playing if they are asked to do morally repugnant acts? In *Artery* each audient was a desperate young man named Jay and was asked to steal the girlfriend's necklace. Some audients refused to lift the ice and maintained their own moral character. How many of these non-conformists would have chosen to steal the diamonds had there been alternative tapes/reasons? Maybe they just didn't like being pushed into it.

We're coming closer to a time when choice-making could be a factor in theatre as it now is in adventure-format video games and in life. Walkman theatre has thus far zapped the proscenium and brought forth the theatrical entity: the audient. It has opened up a world of theatrical possibilities with the only truly hard data—you have to push Play.

Chris Hardman [T91] is the artistic director of Antenna, a performance group in Sausalito, California.