BANG BANG: PROFESSIONAL WRESTLER MICK FOLEY, PERSONA AND HITTING THE MARK.

By

Michael S. Carr

An Abstract
Of a library paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Theatre & Dance University of Central Missouri

December, 2014
ABSTRACT

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The purpose of writing this paper is to discover how one can use Reader Response and Reaction Theory while viewing the many personae of professional wrestler Mick Foley. I define for the reader what persona is and discuss what Reader Response and Reaction Theory is. I discuss the history of professional wrestling to give the uninitiated reader some background information on the topic, so they may be better equipped to understand the terms, as well as the ideas being disseminated. Then I detail each persona and the reaction and response the persona got from the fans. I did this by watching Mick Foley’s wrestling matches on DVD. The method I used was by watching for cheers, boos, gestures, chants, facial expression, and no reaction. The paper also breaks the audience down into sections such as, social class, families, women, and the elderly, so the reader can understand the response that is given for each demographic.
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INTRODUCTION

The lights dim at the arena, and a spotlight focuses on the entrance just below the huge video screen known as the titantron. Suddenly, the audience hears the familiar sounds of two cars crashing together and right then the professional wrestling fans know that Mick Foley will be emerging from the entrance to make his way to the ring.

This paper will look at how Reader-Response Reaction Theory works in the world of professional wrestling. Specifically by using the many characters of pro wrestling superstar Mick Foley to see the Response and Reaction from the audience that Mick Foley and each of his persona’s get.

The paper will start by defining personae, taking a brief overview of what Reader-Response and Reaction is and how it works. It will then give a quick history of professional wrestling, a brief bio of Mick Foley the person, and then discuss each of his characters and how the professional wrestling fans respond and react to each one.

PERSONA

The concept of a persona goes back centuries in the theatre. According to Marshall, “the concept of a persona refers to the ancient theatrical masks called personae” (Marshall, p. 472).
Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) “believed that each person constructs a personality out of innumerable roles one is asked to play in various realms” (Brockett p. 209). Thus one has a different persona from each realm. Some people would have a mask or persona for each occasion such as, one for family, one for work, and one for church.

If people are honest with themselves, then they will see that how they present themselves to their mothers is different than the presentation they give to their friends or coworkers. For example, a politician trying to create an image of the common everyday person or a person trying to give a good impression at a job interview are both examples of personae. Professional wrestlers, such as Mick Foley, create different personae to get the audience to react or respond with boos or cheers.

A persona in professional wrestling comes down to basically two things, the good guys (baby) and the bad guys (heel). The persona of a baby is usually good looking, tough, muscular, and likable. Promoters most of the time use the personae of a soldier, a patriotic everyman, a rock star, or whatever is popular in the pop culture at the time. These personae are created by waving a flag, standing up for what is right, standing up for people, or can be obtained by wearing the sports jersey of the town they are in. The reaction received from wearing something from a sports team is referred to as a cheap pop (Bagwell).
The personae of a heel is based on stereotypes, such as the loud mouth, the cheater, the Russian, the Middle Easterner, the Hispanic or any other nationality getting talked about negatively in the media. Sometimes they use the personae of a mentally disturbed or outcast person. They often create these personae by cheating, using a manager to cheat, being anti-American, and many other methods. These characters personify the evil that men do. They use anything to get the fans to react negatively towards them and to hate them.

WRESTLING FANS IN CATEGORIES

There are many different types of wrestling fans. According to Michael Ball, wrestling fans are looked at in categories. The categories are as follows: social class, families, women, and the elderly.

The first category Ball wrote about was social class. According to Ball, “Wrestling fans have popularly been believed to be composed largely of lower-class people. … the lower-class naivete supposedly allow members to be “taken in” more easily than members of other classes” (Ball, 1990, p.56). This allows them to believe that what they were seeing is real. Although that may have been true in the 1950's through the 1970's, by the mid 1980's, Ball states that more middle and upper-class people were now going to professional wrestling events. An article by Bruce Newman in Sports Illustrated states, “If members of the middle-class are attending wrestling matches at a higher rate
than in the past, their behavior has come to emulate the working class rather than the reverse” (Newman, 1985, p.62).

The second category Ball included was families. “The introduction of women’s wrestling into the sport in the early 1930’s brought the attention of men who viewed it as a freak event, as well as curious women” (Ball, 1990, p.57), thus the start of bringing families sprang up. Today when one goes to professional wrestling matches, one can see the audience is mainly comprised of families.

The third category Ball introduced was women. Unlike other sports where the majority of the fans are male, professional wrestling has an almost equal number of men and women in the audience. The reasons for this could be many things. The two most popular theories is that, “women are the ’traditional custodians of moralit’ and are especially attracted to the morality play between the forces of good and evil” (Stone and Oldenburg, 1967, p.528). “Another theory states that girls are socialized to control their hostility and to ‘act like ladies’ wrestling acts as a kind of catharsis. Allowing them to vent their frustration and their aggressive feelings” (It Pays to Sponsor Television Corn, 1950, p.25). Of course another reason for some women to come to wrestling shows is the same reason women go to heavy metal concerts, which is to hook up with the performers in the music world. These women are called “groupies”. In the professional
wrestling world, they are called “rats”. No matter the reason professional wrestling
seems to appeal to both male and female.

The forth category Ball wrote about is the elderly. The elderly have always been
a huge part of professional wrestling audiences and are sometimes the most
dangerous. Maurice Vachon reports to Pete Dexter, “The worst are the old people. A 75
year old man cut my brothers throat ear to ear while he was leaving the ring” (Dexter,
1984, p.132). Other wrestlers have been hit with purses full of bricks. According to
Memories of Studio Wrestling: Early Days of Studio Wrestling in Pittsburgh’s website,
there was a lady who the wrestlers referred to as Ringside Rosie. Ringside Rosie
would try to hurt the bad guys any way she could. Lord Stevens of SSPW has been
assaulted with a cane by an elderly lady the fans affectionately called “Mamaw”. The
reaction of the elderly is one that surprises many and cannot really be explained except
that it appears that the elderly are “obsessed seeing the villain brought to justice by the
hero” (Ball, 1990, p.59).

No matter who the fans are the response or the reaction given by the audience to
the participants contribute to the overall aesthetic of the show.
READER-RESPONSE AND REACTION THEORY

After looking at what persona is and examples of persona, one needs to study Reader-Response Reaction Theory and how it works. Reader Response Theory looks at how the audience contributes to the meaning and importance of the work (Fortier, p.132).

Reader response stresses the importance of the reader's role in interpreting texts. Rejecting the idea that there is a single, fixed meaning inherent in every literary work, this theory holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through a "transaction" with the text based on personal associations. Because all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique.

Many trace the beginning of reader-response theory to scholar Louise Rosenblatt's influential 1938 work Literature As Exploration. Rosenblatt's ideas were a reaction to the formalist theories of the New Critics, who promoted "close readings" of literature, a practice which advocated rigid scholarly detachment in
the study of texts and rejected all forms of personal interpretation by the reader. According to Rosenblatt, the New Critics treated the text as "an autonomous entity that could be objectively analyzed" using clear-cut technical criteria. Rosenblatt believed instead that "the reading of any work of literature is, of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader and a particular text at a particular time under particular circumstances."

(http://www.learner.org/workshops/hslit/session1)

According to Patricia Harkin, Reader-Response Reaction Theory goes back to two movements: the Elitist Theory of the 1970’s and the Populist Political Movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s (Harkin, 2005). However, Davis and Womack states that Reader-Response Reaction Theory “finds its roots well before the twentieth century in the Ancient Greek and Roman cultures that viewed literature as a rhetorical device for manipulating a given audience’s reaction” (Davis, Womack, p.52). They also state “in many ways, the development of Reader-Response criticism via the auspices of the new criticism finds its roots in the groundbreaking work of I.A Richards in the 1920’s and Louise M. Rosenblatt during the 1930’s (Davis, Womack, p.53). No matter when Reader-Response Reaction Theory started, according to Poyas, “Reader-Response
has gained acceptance in various fields (Poyas, 2004) and “Recently theorists such as Robert Sholes have broadened our conceptions of texts to include a range of modes, genres, and media forms” (Beach p.7). Reader-Response Reaction Theory comes down to how the audience responds and what they bring to the performance based on their experiences, religious beliefs, morals, values, etc.

Feminist Theorist Julia Wood, who is a professor emerita at Linburger and who has written many books on the subject refers to Reader Response Theory in her book *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture* as frame of reference. Everything we hear, see, and read is filtered through our own frame of reference and our frame of reference is dictated by the above list. How a person responds is different from person to person because each person is unique. Since every person’s brain pattern is unique, each person responds a little differently to what they see, hear, or read.

This is not new in the world of theatre as both Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) in his theatre of cruelty and Bertholt Brecht (1898-1956) in his Alienation concept attempt to get any response or reaction from the audience, because they did not want theatre to be passive. Bertholt Brecht and Antonin Artaud wanted the theatre to interact more with their audience.
These ingrained influences allow the audience to contribute their own meaning to the performance. Although some generic symbols have a mostly universal meaning, such as white being good and/or virginal, people will still bring their own meaning into it. This goes for everything, including professional wrestling.

The system used was watching matches on Video that Mick Foley was involved in and observing the audiences. The method I used was by watching for cheers, boos, gestures, chants, facial expression, and no reaction. Bagwell has stated, “The dreaded ‘no reaction’ is the worst for a professional wrestler, as it means he or she is not relating to the fans at all in any capacity” (Bagwell).

PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

Modern professional wrestling started in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The most popular form was known as Catch as Catch Can (CACC) and developed into two distinctive styles: professional and rural (Modern Wrestling 1895). Today it is known as “wrestling” for north, east, and west, and “southern style” for the south. According to Ball, “The major difference being ‘professional’ wrestling was regulated, a referee was always present and the rules were enforced. ‘Rural’ wrestling looked like a bar room brawl.” (Ball, 1990, p.41)
According to Eric Bischoff, former General Manager of World Championship Wrestling (WCW), “American Wrestling began in the United States as a sideshow carnival attraction. It thrived and grew because it blended showmanship, unique characters and illusion” (Bischoff, 2006, p.5). It’s attraction as a mainstay at carnivals continued until the 1950’s. In the 1950’s television really took off in the United States and stations were in need of cheap programming, thus professional wrestling became a regular program in many areas, because it was cheap to produce. The show was filmed in a studio and yielded decent ratings, which caused professional wrestling to become very popular. The 1950’s and early 1960’s was the most popular time for professional wrestling.

Professional wrestling kind of waned in the 1970’s, but the popularity took off again in the 1980’s and early 1990’s, with its spectacle and the ability to reach more audience members via pay-per-view and national syndication. It went mainstream when World Wrestling Entertainment owner Vince McMahon mixed rock music with it to form the rock and wrestling connection, which led to what is still the biggest wrestling draw each year – WrestleMania. Vince McMahon also had a cartoon series on Saturday morning television to appeal to children.

Just like all great drama throughout history need good and evil (baby and heel) in a battle for supremacy, professional wrestling gives the fans this. Unlike other sports
where a fan cheers for their favorite team, the professional wrestling fans typically cheer the good guy (baby) over the bad guy (heel). In this way the promoter and the performer is “telling” the audience who to cheer for. Almost every professional wrestler has done both baby and heel sometime in their career. Some like Mick Foley gave us totally different personae, when he made the switch from baby to heel.

**MICK FOLEY**

Mick Foley’s real name is Michael Francis Foley. He was born on June 07, 1965 at Long Island, New York to an upper-middle class family. He graduated from Ward Melville High School in East Setauket, New York in 1983. He spent that summer as a life guard, but what changed his life forever was seeing Jimmy “Superfly” Snuka dive off the top of a steel cage during his match. Mick’s response was to want to be a wrestler, and his reaction was to “leap off Danny Zucker’s roof in my terrible home movie ‘The Loved One’” (Foley, 2001, p.49). This got his foot in the door to become a professional wrestler; he claims his “real keys to my success was driving 800 miles round trip to Dominic Denucci’s Wrestling School in Pittsburgh every weekend for a year and a half” (Foley, 2001, p.49).

Mick Foley lived his dream and became a wrestling superstar working for all three major wrestling companies (World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), Extreme Championship Wrestling (ECW), and World Championship Wrestling (WCW)). He also
Mick Foley, wrestling superstar, has also become a best-selling author, TV personality, and stand-up comedian. Married with children, he has transitioned into a hardcore legend, and fans are behind the response and reactions.

Cactus Jack -- imgarcade.com

Mick Foley’s first “star” character was Jack Manson, due to his resemblance to cult leader Charles Manson. It was easy for him to get the audience to hate him, but after a while, being linked to a murderer was not helping him get booked. Thus, he dropped the Manson last name and became Cactus Jack. This persona started off...
being a rough and rugged nut job, who hailed from Truth or Consequences, New Mexico and would do anything to win. He was very successful as a heel because he was able to “dig deep to come up with and showcase the ugly side of my personality” (Foley, 2001, p.220).

The crowds’ response was pure hatred and disgust, and they wanted him to get beaten badly (Cactus Jack vs Big Van Vader 4-17-1993). In 1994 at Munich, Germany, whether by accident or by fate, Mick Foley lost a good portion of his ear to professional wrestler Vader in a match. This caused the fans to react strongly in his favor and his catch phrase “bang bang” became a part of the wrestling fans’ vernacular. This persona from the matches viewed on Mick Foley’s greatest hits and misses shows that women in the audience were appalled by the punishment Mick put his body through, while the males, including the male children’ seem to want more carnage. One also notices the give and take between the performer and the audience. This is shown by the look of horror and disgust on the women’s faces, the gleeful smiles and cheers emanating from the men in the audience, and the chants of Mick Foley thundering through the arena.

Whenever the crowd starts dying down or chanting for something violent, Foley will oblige them by getting hit with a steel chair or barb wire. It must be noted that American fans are not the only ones that respond or react this way to Cactus Jack. One
of his most famous matches happened in the early nineties in Japan, where he took on Terry Funk in a “C4” match. In this type of match, the ropes are covered in barbwire and the turnbuckle had a small amount of C4 attached so when they hit it, it would set off a small explosion. Overall, the response and reaction by the Japanese fans to Cactus Jack could be equated to bloodlust.

As for how the reader-response reaction theory works from a cultural perspective. In Mick Foley’s case, they work about the same from region-to-region and country-to-country. As I just discussed, Japan thought the C4 match between Foley and Funk was great and responded just as their American counterparts did. In Mexico and Puerto Rico, they are more “hardcore” with their wrestling styles so the Cactus Jack persona plays well there. As for the United States, the Midwest, North, East and West tend to like their matches less violent than in the South, but in Foley’s case his reputation precedes him, so the audience expects the brutality and it does not seem to lessen the response or the reaction. I suspect that the fans all over would feel let down if Foley’s matches were not brutal.

It may be as if the excess violence used by or on Cactus Jack is a catharsis for the audience, not all that different from Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty theory. According to film director Stuart Gordon, the Theatre of Cruelty theory “was that all theatre should be acts of violence, crimes committed onstage, because he felt that is the way for people to
get these idea's out of their system” (Ognjanovic, 2014, p. 88). In many respects, Cactus Jack matches are a barbaric study in violence, whether as a babyface or a heel, the men and teens especially want to see the over-the-top violence that most Cactus Jack matches have.

When Mick Foley went to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), owner Vince McMahon gave Mick Foley a new persona. This one was abused, deformed, and unstable, and called himself Mankind. He felt that all mankind was abused, deformed, and unstable. Mankind came into WWE under the management of Paul Bearer, who was also managing another professional wrestler known as “the Undertaker” at the time. Most of the time, managers are used in wrestling when the promoter feels that the wrestler cannot “get over”. In other words, they can’t get a reaction or response on their
own (Gibson). Whether this was the case in Mankind having a manager is unknown, but what Mick Foley did with the character was just as brutal as his Cactus Jack persona. He changed his catchphase from “Bang Bang” to a sinister version of “Have a nice day”. He would self-mutilate by ripping his own hair out and his finishing move was known as the “mandible claw”, where Mankind would put his three middle fingers into the guy’s mouth supposedly pinching the nerve at the back of their tongue to make them pass out again.

As with his Cactus Jack persona, the women could not stand the ultra-violence (Cactus Jack vs Big Van Vader 4-17-1993). Although as time went on, Mankind’s matches became far less brutal than Cactus Jack. The men and children hated him, and their reaction was to boo him and wanted to see him lose. After a while, all the abuse that Mankind took started to wear on the fans and the response and reactions changed to where there were some boos and some cheers. This caused Mankind to go from Heel to Baby. As a baby. Though, the Mankind persona got stale and the fans just quit responding one way or the other; therefore, another Mick Foley’s personae emerged (Mankind vs. Shawn Michaels 9-22-1996).
Dude Love was actually Mick Foley’s first creation when he first started on the Indy Circuit. As he say, “Dude Love was my fantasy creation of what a man was supposed to be. I never envisioned a freak like Mankind or a weirdo like Cactus Jack” (Foley, 1999, p.48). “The June 1984 Dude was quite a bit different from the dude who entered the World Wrestling Federation in 1997” (Foley, 1999, p.48). The first dude was more laid back than the tie-dyed groovy Dude Love of the World Wrestling Federation.

From viewing his matches, one can see that this persona hit on something the other two didn’t and that is everyone responded and reacted to Dude Love. The women loved him, the men admired him, and the children thought he was funny. The late professional wrestler “Ravishing” Rick Rude had a catchphase that went “Every woman
wants me and every man wants to be me." However, this was the certainly the case with Dude Love.

According to the audience reaction, the character of Dude Love was a gimmick that got old pretty quickly. Mick Foley stated on Mick Foley’s Greatest Hits and Misses that Dude Love was his least favorite character. Unlike the catchphrase that came before “Bang Bang” and “Have a nice day”, Dude Love got saddled with “Oww mercy”. Since Dude Love was not a freak or a weirdo like Mankind and Cactus Jack were, the matches were not as brutal at first. After a few months, even the creation of “Mr. Socko”, a sock puppet he would use to perform the mandible claw, the fans responses and reactions were fading. The fans were giving little to no reaction to his matches.

So the promoters tried what every promoter does when a character runs their course, they turned Dude Love from Baby to Heel by having him attack one of the good guys. Still from those matches, one can see that Mick Foley feels uncomfortable in the ring and the fans could tell. For example, in Dude Love vs. “Stone Cold” Steve Austin match (5-31-1998), the audience could see that physically Foley was unsure of himself and he kept wanting to revert to past personae. Therefore, not providing any response or reaction, at least not much of one.

So once again, Mick Foley changed his persona. By this time, everyone who followed wrestling knew that Cactus Jack, Mankind, and Dude Love were all extensions
of different parts of Mick Foley’s personality, so his next persona took that into account and the fans got the wrestling version of Mick Foley.

Mick’s new theme music was the sound of two cars crashing. The response and reaction of the fans was instant. By this time, the fans had been seeing his matches—whether on TV, live, or online—for well over a decade, and knew the sound of two cars crashing was in reference to the years and abuse or “crashing”, that Mick Foley did with his body to entertain them. The World Wrestling Entertainment wanted Mick Foley to come as he described it “a broken down baby face” (Foley, 2002, p.223), and for financial reasons, went heel by turning on The Rock.
As Mick Foley, he could utilize the best of his other three incarnations, like barbed wire, “Bang Bang” from Cactus Jack, the Mandible Claw of Mankind, and Mr. Socko from Dude Love. Mick Foley could also add new things to his repertoire as needed for a match. At this point, Foley merged all of his personae together, so he was not limited to be just Cactus Jack, Mankind, or Dude Love, but he could take on any aspect of their personae whenever he needed to get a response from the audience. In the April 02, 2006, *Mick Foley vs. Edge* match, Mick Foley uses elements from at least three of his personae, with only the personae of Dude Love missing.

The reaction and response from the fans were exactly like he wanted (*Mick Foley: Greatest Hits & Misses*). By this time, Mick Foley was considered a hardcore legend, and the fans, men and women alike, expected the brutality.

This paper has discussed the normal wrestling fans’ responses and reactions to Mick Foley, but would be remiss if it did not mention the responses and reactions of family members. The fans, who do not know Mick Foley personally, delight in him getting hit with chairs, going through tables, bleeding, etc., but for family members the reaction and responses are quite different.

In the documentary *Beyond the Mat*, directed by Barry W. Blaustein, one section follows Mick Foley and his family the day leading up to his big pay-per-view match against The Rock. Instead of filming the whole match, they filmed the reactions and
responses of his wife and children. The match was really brutal, which most of Mick Foley’s are. His wife reacted by crying, and his kids got so visibly upset that their mother had to take them back to the dressing room area. Even after the match, Mick Foley and The Rock were trying to comfort the kids, but to really no avail. This shows the kind of reaction and responses that this form of entertainment can bring. It shows that the family members’ reactions differ from those of the fans without a personal connection.

Today, Mick Foley is a stand-up comedian traveling the world with his show. In a review by Brooks Oglesby, on Mick Foley’s show in Ocala, Florida, he writes, “Although Foley makes an effort to make his shows accessible to those with no knowledge of the wrestling business, I imagine such people may have missed a few punchlines” (Oglesby, 2012). Oglesby also states that “it would be wise for non-fan to get a rudimentary understanding of the biggest personalities in the business” (Oglesby, 2012). That is admittedly because his stand-up routine consists of relating funny stories from the road, the many people he has met and worked with, as well as, the world of professional wrestling in general.

So why and how does the audience respond to Mick Foley and professional wrestling? If the frame of reference theory is correct, then we all have our own reasons—perhaps from one’s experiences, they have dealt with someone like Mick Foley or his opponent, maybe the morality tale of good vs evil appeals to them, or maybe the value
of honor appeals to them, that is up to each audience member to figure out in accordance to their own reasoning. Maybe their reason is, the cathartic like discussed previously in this paper. If a person hates their job or their boss, they cannot really do anything about it, but seeing Mick Foley knock the stuffing out of his boss “Mr. McMahon”, allows the worker to live vicariously through them. Some people run or go to the gym to get their aggression out; however, wrestling fans seem to go to wrestling shows and participate through yelling and screaming to relieve aggression. Perhaps it’s nostalgia, like Patricia Harkin mentions in her article, “The Reception of Reader-Response Theory.”

As stated before, many families attend wrestling shows and have for some time. In some families, they have been going to wrestling shows to the point that it is a multi-generational thing. For some, going to the wrestling shows allows them to respond by remembering when as a father, they took their little boy to wrestling, and even through the little boy is now a grown man, they can still relive the memories. For others, it’s because going to the matches with Grandpa, who is now deceased, or maybe it’s the nostalgia of remembering one’s youth by going to see wrestlers one grew up on watching, who are now still working the Indy Circuit. Although both are now older, for the five to ten minutes the match takes place, one may respond by reliving their youth. Whatever the reason, the audience responds or reacts, the fact remains they do respond. One can hear the response and reactions in any arena or high school gym across the country.
Responding or reacting to wrestling matches is no different than responding to a play or a movie, except the wrestling audience can be more interactive, they yell, scream, and maybe even cry. The wrestling audience is just like fans, who cried when Willy Loman dies in Arthur Miller’s (1915-2005) Death of a Salesman or excited after watching the Lion King on Broadway. Do fans respond to each wrestling character the same? No, it’s up to the performers like Mick Foley to bring something to their persona that gets them cheered (Pop) or booed (heat), because without that, the audience response or reaction would be nil.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has discussed what a persona is and has provided examples, discussed what Reader-Response Reaction Theory is, given a brief history of professional wrestling, stated who Mick Foley is, and the response and reaction each of his four personae got. Reader Response and Reaction theory, which started as a way to address literature, has already been discussed has gained acceptance in various fields such as film, communication, theatre, sociology, and others (Poyas, 2004). This was done with the hope of focusing on how Reader-Response Reaction Theory works on all levels and in all mediums that people will understand that whatever you do will cause people to respond and/or react to you, so be careful. Like Rockwell sang in the 1980’s “Somebody’s Watching You” and Mankind would say, “Have a nice day.”
Bibliography


