

Engagement proposal as dramaturgical performance (Schweingruber, Anahita & Berns)

Method: interviews with engaged couples

Premise: Engagement is a performance put on for two audiences

Man's performance for woman

Couple's performance for family and friends (second-hand audience)

Successful performance communicates:

The man is a worthy fiancé (who am I?)

This is an engagement proposal (what is going on?)

The couple ought to be married (the performance team)

A bad performance can ruin any of the three messages

A successful performance relies on using a standard script. The standard script includes the following elements:

The man proposes to the woman

The man gets down on one knee

The man presents a ring to the woman

The proposal is a surprise

The proposal is organized around ideas about the sexes—man as initiator, chooser and money maker/spender; woman as passive and chosen.

Two reasons for the continued dominance of the “traditional proposal”:

1. The foreground meanings for the proposal elements are signs the proposal is taking place. The absence throws the three messages into doubt. Other meanings given to the elements are positive (“traditional,” “romantic”) and meanings connected to sex inequality are downplayed or dismissed.

2. No alternative rituals exist.

The man proposes to the woman

Proposal initiated by woman may not count

Most people had no idea of meaning of this tradition

Why did he ask you instead of you asking him?] I have no idea. [Did you consider asking him?] No. I don't know, I just probably always assumed that he would ask me then.

People suspected that female proposal would confuse the second-hand audience

[Why did he ask you instead of you asking him?] Because he told me that if I asked him, then he would say no. [Why is that?] Because he said that that's the way that he always had it.... But actually I wanted him to get a ring so that he would kind of be branded as taken too, but he didn't think that was a very good idea.... [Can you tell me why he wasn't interested in getting a ring?] He was worried that that would confuse people and that they would think that he was already married.

The man gets down on one knee

No subjects knew the meaning of the man getting down on one knee tradition

Um...I don't know. Maybe it's man like going back to tradition, man trying to be submissive to his wife, who knows really, but it just seems like the chivalrous thing to do I guess, you know because you're asking and when you get lower than the other person you're supposed to be submissive. I don't know what it means really, but I like it.

Because getting down on one knee is not found in other interactions, it clearly indicates a proposal is taking place

The man presents a ring to the woman

Failure to produce a ring casts doubt on the proposal

He said... will you marry me and I said yes. And then he pulled out this ring box and in it was a ring made out of pine needles and I started to cry because I was expecting my real ring. And so I started to cry and he's like, "I promise I'll give you the real ring as soon as I can" and all this stuff. And so I was trying to be really nice about it, but in my head I was going, "Oh my gosh, I want my diamond." ... So after doing that for about two minutes, then he pulled a box out of the other pocket and it had my ring in it.

I actually kind of faked her out that night. I acted like I was getting something on the couch and I was on one knee and I had my hands closed and she was getting all excited then and so like I go, will you marry me, and I open my hands up and there's nothing there. And she's like, she said, told me how mean that was and that the next time I do that it'd better be real.

Second-hand audience demands to see ring

I think the first thing my mom said is, "Let's see your finger" because she knew he was going to ask so we just kind of broke, you know, told everyone what happened and that we were engaged and let everyone know.

The proposal is a surprise

Surprise involves time, place & manner, not the decision to marry

We both knew it was coming and we both knew it was going to happen that night, but she didn't know exactly how it was going to happen.

The only real surprises didn't result in marriage

Well, the first time that I was proposed to was when I was a sophomore here and it was completely insane. I mean we'd only been together three months. We hadn't even really said that we loved each other at all and it was just like we were just out on a date... and he just proposed to me.... I didn't know where it was coming from or anything and so it didn't work.

Planning the Proposal

The woman acts as both the audience (front stage) and a member of the performance team (back stage)

The man and woman attempt to balance two conflicting goals: (1) surprise and (2) making the audience happy

Strategies for balancing the goals in regards to the ring:

Woman tells man not to tell her anything

Woman and man shop together; she gives him some information

Couple picks ring together; man buys it later

After woman provides information, man makes decisions and woman waits

The planned performance is often disrupted by emotion, but emotional non-verbal expression is evidence of “true love”

Engagement is the “man’s moment”

Most romantic events are “feminine” moments that require more work from women than men, e.g., proms, weddings

The proposal is the man’s only romantic event, but requires much less effort:

The woman gives him instructions

The script is fairly simple

Requires only one prop (ring) and no special costumes

Minimal enhancements (e.g., proposing in favorite place) create “romance”

Even botching the performance may count to his credit