



2005 Theatre Studies GA 2: Performance examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

Assessors were impressed with many of the monologue performances they viewed and with the detailed and imaginative preparation evident in many students' work. The work of some students raised concerns with regard to both the level of preparation evident and to the student's compliance with the examination conditions.

Some students did not seem to be aware of the limitations placed on weapons and hazardous materials, as stipulated in the guidelines published with the monologue list in the VCAA Bulletin. These limitations are not optional and a number of students were disadvantaged through having to change their plans at the last minute. All hazardous materials need to be checked by the venue co-ordinator prior to the performance. Students should be aware that assessors, just as any audience, use their imagination and do not always need to see actual objects. Imagination is an integral aspect of the Theatre Studies monologue performance task.

Some students planned to stand or jump on furniture or, in some instances, to throw furniture. Students should be aware that venues are hired spaces and furniture is limited to that provided by the venue. When in doubt, or if there are particular requirements, students should bring their own furniture. In some instances, the furniture is not designed to be stood upon and in no circumstances should the furniture or the floor be damaged. This includes damage through liquids that might be spilled onto a carpet. Liquids are not forbidden, but there is a high expectation that the use of liquids will be limited, highly controlled and very well-rehearsed. Although highly dramatic, breaking mirrors or glass is generally a poor substitute for a carefully constructed theatrical moment. Too often, breakages and spillages are signs of poorly considered and conceived ideas – more indicative of poor planning, desperation and melodramatics than complexity and depth.

Some students required assistance from their peers to carry equipment to and from the performing space. Many of these students then spent a considerable amount of time and effort entering the venue, setting up and leaving the space, often infringing on the time allocated for the examination proper. The purpose of asking students to carry their own prop items is to encourage a smarter use of stagecraft. Assessors reward theatrical quality, not quantity. Assessors are searching for smart theatrical ideas, not photographic representations of the real world. It was too often the case that the higher the number and the larger the size of props, the lesser the quality of the work. This was simply because a poor choice of stagecraft was often indicative of a limited use of appropriate performance techniques.

Each year there are monologues that deal with difficult or adult themes, such as seduction, or suggest that characters are dressed in a provocative or less-than-conservative manner. As with the use of weapons, settings or any other matter that requires theatrical interpretation, students should be aware that the intention is theatrical rather than purely literal or realistic. If a monologue suggests that a character is peering out of a window, emptying the contents of a filing cabinet, holding a sword or a machine gun, or standing over a dead body, the assessors are looking for theatrical interpretation rather than realistic exactitude. Similarly, with the suggestion that a character is dressed in a slip, nightwear or any similar state of undress, the intention should be to evoke rather than to literally interpret the instruction. Assessors expect to see students appropriately dressed, regardless of the perceived demands of the monologue. Teachers need to feel comfortable that their students are rehearsing in an appropriate manner and assessors need to feel similar comfort when assessing. These are difficult guidelines to frame, but crossing the invisible line should be obvious.

A number of schools seemed to take the approach that it would be better or easier if all students attempted the same monologue. Although the practical benefits seem obvious, the result was often disadvantageous, and sometimes disastrous, for the students themselves. This is a VCE examination and it is not appropriate for all students to perform the same monologue. The practice of schooling students with the same directorial choices and blocking, or similar interpretations, is a distortion of the aims and purposes of the examination and the stipulations of the *Theatre Studies VCE Study Design*. The interpretation of the scene and the monologue are personal matters that must be dealt with in great detail in the written examination. Although one interpretation for an entire class might serve the short-term needs of the monologue, ultimately, the limitations of such an approach will severely disadvantage the students in both the performance and written examinations.

The results

The 2005 results, similarly to previous years, suggest that each criterion was addressed with roughly equal success. The performance exam was marked out of a total of 105. The table below shows the average mark (out of seven) for each of the criteria. The results suggest that the most difficult, or the least well addressed, criteria were criteria 2, 3 and 4,

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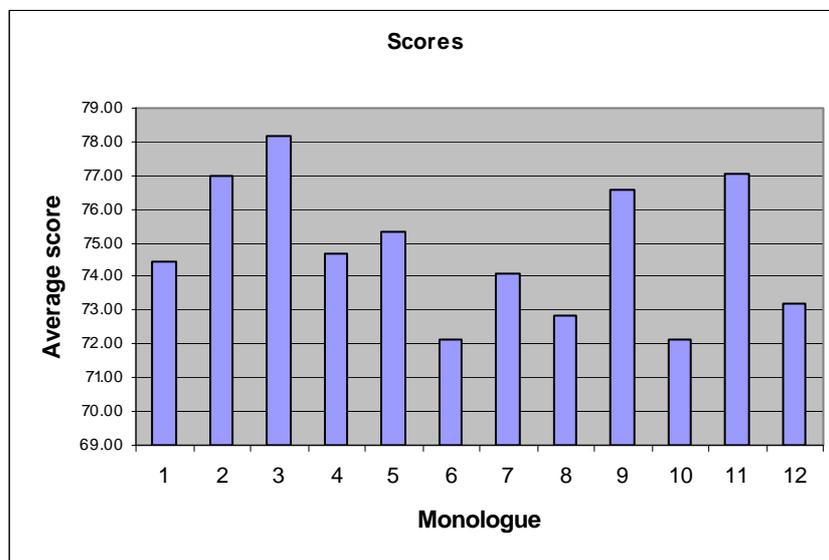


Interpretation, Style and Intended Meaning, followed by criterion 5, Monologue Conventions. Criterion 1, Context, achieved the highest mean score.

Criterion	1	2	3	4	5
Average (%)	5.2	4.9	4.9	4.9	5.1

The following chart ranks each monologue from one to 12 in terms of popularity, average score and perfect score (the percentage of students who performed that monologue who achieved a perfect score). For example, Lear was performed by 6.7 per cent of students, making it the 9th most popular monologue. It received the highest average score (78.17 out of a possible 105) and the highest percentage of perfect scores. The graph below shows the average score for each monologue.

Monologue		Popularity		Average Score		Perfect Score	
Number	Name	Ranking	Percentage	Ranking	Score	Ranking	Percentage
1	Messenger	3	10.4%	7	74.45	5	6%
2	The Author	6	9.1%	3	76.98	8	5%
3	Lear	9	6.7%	1	78.17	1	8%
4	Bodice	7	7.6%	6	74.65	11	4%
5	Landlady	4	10.3%	5	75.36	4	7%
6	Monk	5	9.2%	11	72.14	12	3%
7	Flora	1	14.8%	8	74.10	10	4%
8	Edward	10	6.4%	10	72.82	9	5%
9	Maggie	2	12.1%	4	76.60	3	7%
10	Big Daddy	11	4.2%	12	72.13	2	8%
11	Hermoine	8	6.8%	2	77.04	7	5%
12	Antigonus	12	1.1%	9	73.17	6	6%



Areas of Strength and Weakness

Students are assessed on each of the five criteria based on an eight-point scale (0–7). Assessors strive to ask the question, ‘Did the student work?’ rather than, ‘Did the performance work?’ There is no specific criterion to assess whether the monologue succeeds as a piece of theatre or whether the student is ‘talented’. Such considerations are beyond the scope of this examination, and it is possible to receive an exemplary grade for a performance that is far from theatrically ‘perfect’. Theatrical perfection presupposes that there is a right or best response to a monologue, which is a fallacy.

Stronger performances were generally characterised by:

- a thorough understanding of the scene and the world of the play as a whole (the context)



- a clear knowledge of the intended period and the application of a style and appropriate conventions to create this period
- a mastery of the language, in whatever idiom, style, accent or structure was required or suggested by the chosen interpretation
- a willingness to interpret the monologue in an original, interesting and appropriate manner
- a strong and clear awareness of implied person and place
- an awareness of levels of meaning, the subtexts that underpinned the text and the contexts within which the monologue existed
- an awareness of the actor/audience relationship and an ability to utilise this understanding
- an awareness of the physicality of the character and the theatrical use of space
- direct and indirect evidence of extensive research, rehearsal and preparation
- practised and detailed use of costumes and props (and settings where appropriate)
- an ability to address and utilise the limitations of monologue conventions to maximum effect
- a strong sense of belief
- an ability to engage the assessors through the metaphorical transformation of time, place and situation.

Weaker performances were generally characterised by:

- a poor perception of the world of the character within the greater context of the play as a whole
- an inability to offer a clear and specific interpretation that was grounded in an appropriate style and conventions
- an inability to master the rhythms and nuances of the language
- little direct or indirect evidence of research or preparation
- a concentration on text and literal meaning, with minimal reference to subtext, context or the intended meaning of the playwright
- a concentration on the verbal rather than the physical
- a concentration on the immediate, the here and now, rather than the before, after and beyond
- wasted time and effort in the construction of peripheral or irrelevant details of aspects of props, setting, costume, hair or make-up
- a lack of awareness of implied person or place
- a lack of awareness of audience, actor/audience interrelationship or the manipulation of the performance space in consideration of the audience
- an inability to come to terms with or transcend the limitations of monologue conventions
- an inability to engage the assessors through the transformation of time or place.



SPECIFIC INFORMATION

The Messenger

This monologue tended to attract students who took a more intellectual approach, and recontextualising was often a sound approach. The better students tended to try to do something interesting or different in terms of context and interpretation. Average students tended to be supported by the focus and rigour that was demanded by the required research.

The better students captured the report of the story and the horror. A basic 'talking head' was generally a poor choice for this monologue because it limited the physical possibilities, which were extensive. The weaker students tended to miss the full import of the horror by dwelling on a melodramatic and superficial telling of the tale.

Some of the more extreme interpretations were considered to go beyond what was thought appropriate to the intentions of the original text. However, there were many inventive and imaginative interpretations which were entirely appropriate to an interpretation of the monologue, including soldiers from many wars, prosecuting lawyers, war crimes tribunals and many references to the current state of the world.

Some of the strongest work either used or made reference to Greek conventions. As in previous years, there were many imaginative approaches to these conventions. Many variations of dance and mask worked particularly well. As in previous years, students are warned of the limitations of mask work, especially masks that cover a significant portion of the face or mouth. Full-face masks should generally only be used for a limited amount of time. Any face-shaping or make-up, however subtle, can also be considered as a reference to the convention of mask. The convention of 'mask' should be thought of in a much broader context than a full-face cover.

The Author

This monologue proved to be a good choice for many students, as those who performed as The Author achieved the third-highest average mark. Some of the best students showed an understanding of the concept of 'magic realism', an unusual and little-referred-to style that is applicable to Lorca. Some students used mime and physical comedy strongly, and interpretations included various Masters of Ceremonies. A number of students freely interpreted Spanish influences and the influences and themes inherent in Lorca's writing, such as political references.

This monologue encouraged students to be imaginative with staging and stagecraft, and students who made brave choices tended to be rewarded. Many students used puppets or puppetry-styled movements. Some stagecraft, such as the creation of small puppet theatres, was particularly apt and imaginative; however, attempting to create a full-sized stage proved to be a less practical and less appropriate choice in a number of instances.

Lear

This was not a popular choice, attracting the third-lowest level of interest from students. However, the students who did perform as Lear achieved the highest average score of all of the monologues and the highest percentage of perfect scores. Even though this is ostensibly a male monologue, it attracted a significant number of girls. There were many interpretations of the mirror, particularly as symbols of royalty. This provided significant imaginative scope and challenged many students. As mentioned earlier in this report, breaking mirrors, glass or carrying out actions which are potentially hazardous should not be encouraged. Rather than the hoped-for theatrical significance, such actions often appear dangerous, ill-conceived, poorly planned and executed and, ultimately, ineffective and melodramatic.

Bodice

Although the average scores were as expected for this character, there was a lower than average percentage of perfect scores. This suggests that this was a difficult monologue to master. This is an interesting statistic when compared with Lear because, where Lear attracted the highest average mark and percentage of perfect scores, Bodice, which is from the same play and playwright, generated the sixth-highest average score and the 11th, or second-lowest, percentage of perfect scores.

Bodice tended to be a popular choice with middle-range students, which might go some of the way to explaining the difference in marks. Many students got caught up with the naturalistic world and missed the broader aspects of the style. The better students captured the dark Bond universe.

Landlady

This was a popular choice with girls and tended to produce much of the average standard of work. The piece tended to support girls of varying abilities. Many students simply did not enter the world of expressionism or the play, choosing



instead to capture the world of naturalism that was best known to them – their own kitchen. While this approach may have helped to flesh out details, it could be limiting in terms of originality and imaginative interpretation.

Where students chose to recontextualise the piece, they needed to ensure that the choices were appropriate and completed for a reason greater than artistic whim. Some choices were not clearly grounded in the text. The best work tended to have a strong sense of physicality and combined a balance of pathos and humour. The poorer work tended to be strident, laboured and tedious, especially where a student was attempting little more than a naturalistic portrayal.

Monk

Although this was a popular choice with boys, the students who performed it received the second-lowest average score and the lowest percentage of perfect scores. Many students struggled with the Australian idioms, and recontextualising was difficult, and perhaps unnecessary, because the original was set in a very open, nondescript setting. Although they are ostensibly familiar to us, Australian idioms demand no less research and background consideration.

As with *Landlady*, the poorer students often attempted no more than a naturalistic portrayal, which significantly diminished the dramatic potential. Some of the girls who chose this piece, perhaps even assisted by the gender change, made some interesting interpretive choices. Students who chose to explore styles such as existentialism or absurdity were much better served by the text. Their choices of style enabled significant convention and intended meaning possibilities to be explored. Where a student chooses to explore only naturalism, the interpretation can seem to have a paucity of ideas because the playwright had little interest in the natural world and was exploring something else entirely.

Some students tended to miss the humour and the lighter touches of the piece. These were often the same students who missed the nature of the Australian idioms in the language and presentation. The better students tended to provide strong moments of physical comedy and timing, which they sustained throughout the piece.

Flora

This was the most popular choice of monologue, but students who performed it achieved the fourth-lowest average score and the third-lowest percentage of perfect scores. The main challenge, which was handled poorly by most students, was understanding the style. Pinter, similarly to Brecht and perhaps even Beckett, is a style unto himself, and the term ‘Pinteresque’ has been coined to describe his work. It is epitomised by many things, but mainly pauses and a sense of menace, all played out in a cold, often dispassionate, unforgiving universe. To play this piece naturalistically was to virtually ignore the entire Pinter universe.

Where the text says ‘love me’, the sub-text hints at pain, fear, indifference, hate, repression, frustration, revenge and much more. To play just the text of this piece, as many students attempted to do, was to ignore the significant sub-textual Pinter universe. This was a short play and students should have been able to clearly identify that the piece did not unfold in a naturalistic manner. Playing the seduction as a literal and realistic interpretation was a limited and limiting approach.

Too many students attempted to simply answer the questions that Pinter poses. Some plays work best by posing questions rather than providing answers: ‘Who are these people?’, ‘What is the nature of their relationship?’, and ‘Who is this matchseller?’ These are interesting questions that do not necessarily require an answer. Answers, by their nature, tend to be fixed and one-dimensional. If *Flora* is a murderer, that is the end of the story, which is analogous to saying, ‘It was all a dream’. The substance of dreams is fascinating; however, dreams as a dramatic structure or form are mundane and somewhat predictable. If we are left to decide for ourselves, *Flora* and her universe might be anything – the possibilities are unfulfilled but endless. Students should aim to join Pinter and ask questions of the audience rather than attempting to answer the questions posed by him.

Edward

Again, keeping with the Pinter style was a hallmark of the best work. It was important with both *Edward* and *Flora* to move them beyond the universe of teenagers in Australia in 2005. Pinter’s alien landscape is cold and foreboding and, most importantly, exemplified by the repressed world of Britain in the 1950s and 60s. The cold and bleak British landscape, in contrast to the warm but barren landscape of *Monk*, is perfectly in keeping with Pinter’s intended universe. It is this kind of world that Pinter’s characters inhabit and this was shown in the best work. Strangely, where *Flora* was the most popular choice of students overall, *Edward*, from the same play and playwright, was only the 10th most popular choice. As with *Flora*, many students struggled, achieving the third-lowest average mark and the fourth-lowest percentage of perfect scores.



Maggie

Maggie was the second most popular choice, and these students achieved the fourth-highest average score and the third-highest percentage of perfect scores. This suggests that many students were advantaged by their choice.

The students who performed best accurately captured the world of the piece. Tennessee Williams tends to have a particular perspective on the world and his characters often inhabit a place that is subject to specific rules and pressures. Language, setting, costume and mood all contribute to this particular universe. The better students understood this universe and devised theatrical strategies to adequately capture its intensity and ambience. For this piece, as well as the ever-present Brick, it was important to capture the world outside. Better students evoked a complex world of internal and external turbulence occurring both inside and beyond the immediate space. Better students also captured the mood shifts and swings which exemplified Maggie, the character.

Big Daddy

Big Daddy was the second least popular choice. Unusually, although students who performed this piece achieved the lowest average score, they achieved the second-highest percentage of perfect scores. This suggests that this was a very difficult monologue to master, but the better students were rewarded for their efforts.

As with Maggie, the principal challenge was capturing the world of the piece. Once established, it was then a significant challenge to create the age, illness through cancer and the life experiences of Big Daddy. Poorer students relied on little more than the ramblings of an old man. Although an accent and a prop is not everything, they can help poorer students find a start to a characterisation and an interpretation. A swagger and a cane do not make a character, but they can lead towards more complex ideas. The poorer students either had not considered such devices or did not move beyond these simple ideas.

Hermoine

This piece provided a significant challenge. Despite, or perhaps because of, this students who performed this monologue achieved the second-highest average score. One challenge was the length of the piece. Being of shorter length, students had the opportunity and the responsibility to do more than merely recite the lines. The best work captured the beauty and the poetry of the language. In such work, there was a genuine sense of engagement and an invitation to the audience to enter the world of the piece. Poorer work struggled with basics, such as the intended meaning and the context of the monologue within the play.

Antigonus

Antigonus was the least popular monologue by a significant margin. Some of the better interpretations recontextualised the piece, many to present day, which allowed for references to the current state of the world. As with Hermoine, the poorer students were not schooled in Shakespeare or his language, and struggled to display even a basic understanding of the intended meaning.

Generally, Shakespeare, the Greeks and other more difficult plays can assist the poorer students because they offer a clear plan for research, study and absorption. Conversely, contemporary works, which may, on the surface, seem easier for poorer students often do not offer a clear action plan. Some students believe that contemporary works require no research at all. This is a fallacy. Although difficult monologues require no more actual work than seemingly straightforward monologues, they may offer a clearer challenge to poorer students.