



## 2003 Theatre Studies GA 2: Monologue Performance examination

### GENERAL COMMENTS

Overall, the results reflected a high level of understanding about the requirements of the task. Students presented a diverse range of interpretations of the prescribed monologues. As with 2002, there were indications of teachers' increasing assurance regarding the theatrical and educational demands of the task. Teachers play both an important and positive role in assisting students to choose the most appropriate monologue and a strong directorial role by acting as observer and informed critic. There is continuing evidence of improvement in the standard of monologue portrayal, the displayed understanding of the demands of the task and the obvious legitimate assistance that students are receiving from their teachers. As teachers and students have become more familiar with the concepts and requirements of the study, the percentage of students able to complete the task to a satisfactory standard has increased. The poorly prepared student with little comprehension of the demands of the task is virtually non-existent.

It is important for the effort to be primarily that of the student, but there are important observation, feedback and directorial roles that can offer invaluable assistance. A performer may not be aware of exactly how he/she appears to an audience. A teacher and/or fellow students must provide this additional support of external observer. This area of observation is especially important during the development of an interpretation of the scene. Taking a performance role in this activity allow a student to experiment with different contexts and interpretations, and to gain a greater insight into his/her specific role within the scene and the play. Many schools provide opportunities for students to perform their scenes and/or monologues to audiences such as other classes and/or parents. All similar exercises and experiences are to be encouraged. They offer students invaluable performance experience in a generally supportive environment. After such experiences, the performance before three assessors is less likely to be so daunting.

The concept of 'taking off' marks in response to specific errors in performance is foreign to the assessment procedure. Rather, assessors search for relevant aspects of the criteria which have been addressed. This is an important distinction because it implies that students can approach the task without fear of being brought undone by a single unintended error. Errors may have little relevance to the specific criteria which are being considered and addressed.

### Statement of Intention

The Statement of Intention is designed to assist the student to explain what is being attempted. As observers and directors, teachers are in an excellent position to point students towards areas of a monologue where the student's intentions may not be entirely clear to assessors. Teachers also may assist students to identify the theoretical mechanisms that underpin the performance. Teachers should note that although Statements of Intention are compulsory, there is no actual grade allocated specifically to the Statement of Intention. Students will not lose marks for a poorly written Statement of Intention.

There are spaces on the Statement of Intention under headings related to the five criteria. Students should not feel compelled to address all five criteria – only those where some clarification or expansion of ideas may prove enlightening to the assessors. In virtually all cases, a clear and insightful Statement of Intention accompanied a strong performance. A clear statement of what the student was actually attempting also advantaged some poor and unclear performance work. In some cases, the aim or the goal was simply beyond the skills of the performer. In such cases, a well-written Statement of Intention allows an assessor insight into ideas that were not fully achieved in the performance.

### 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 ask, 'Did the piece work?' There is no specific criterion to assess whether the monologue succeeds as a piece of theatre. 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 far from being the case.

Stronger performances were generally characterised by:

- a thorough understanding of the play as a whole
- a clear knowledge of the intended period, style and appropriate conventions
- a mastery of the language, in whatever idiom, style, accent or structure that was required
- 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 props and costume
- an ability to 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, 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 audience
- an inability to come to terms with or transcend the limitations of monologue conventions
- a poor sense of belief
- an inability to engage the assessors through the transformation of time or place.

### Statistical summary

Of students performing the Theatre Studies Monologue Examination in 2003, about two-thirds were female and a third male. This gender break-up has remained consistent over a number of years. Statistically, females performed fractionally better than males, but the differences were virtually indiscernible, i.e. around .1 on a 7-mark scale. Girls were six times more likely to perform against gender than boys, i.e. 1.76 per cent of girls chose to perform male roles, compared to the 0.32 per cent of boys who chose to perform female roles. There are no statistics to suggest that students were either advantaged or disadvantaged by playing against gender, although this greater flexibility may be a contributing factor to the slight statistical advantage females achieved. Playing against gender is a choice that must be made with care and with due consideration to the five criteria.

As in previous years, some characters were overwhelmingly popular and others significantly all but ignored. Seventy-one per cent of all girls (5 per cent of all students) performed Phillipa, A Woman Alone or Salome. Practically speaking, this meant that every second student who walked into an examination room performed one of these three characters. In contrast, only 1 per cent of students chose to perform the Male Chorus from *Lysistrata*. The Monologue Setting Panel is aware of potential discrepancies and actively seeks an even choice between monologues. There are many factors influencing monologue choice and sometimes it is difficult to predict how and why students will make a choice.

Character	Play	% selected
Salome	<i>Salome</i>	15
Herod	<i>Salome</i>	2
Female Chorus	<i>Lysistrata</i>	3
Male Chorus	<i>Lysistrata</i>	1
Herald	<i>Agamemnon</i>	2
Second Messenger	<i>Oedipus the King</i>	7
Krapp	<i>Krapp's Last Tape</i>	6
Alf	<i>One Day of the Year</i>	9
Berenger	<i>Rhinoceros</i>	11
A Woman Alone	<i>A Woman Alone</i>	18
Miss Woods	<i>Morning Sacrifice</i>	9
Phillipa	<i>All Souls</i>	18

## **SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

### **Salome**

#### ***Salome***

A challenge of this monologue was the choice of the head as a prop and the relationship between Salome and the severed head. The stronger portrayals generally achieved a sense of loss and bereavement as well as the triumph of the victor. Less successful work was generally characterised by such choices as plastic heads, while more successful students tended to evoke rather than display what was always going to be a difficult prop. When students choose a prop, it is important for the prop to be their own rather than shared amongst a group. It is also important for students to rehearse with the prop extensively and to be familiar with its characteristics and possibilities.

Many students struggled with the complexity of the language. The nature of the piece (Wilde regarded the work as poetry as much as a play) provided scope for broad interpretation and recontextualisation which more students might have considered. Interpretation and context are two of the five criteria. Opportunities to explore these areas should be seized upon. Although the monologue attracted a large number of students, it perhaps proved to be more difficult than many first perceived it might be.

### **Herod**

#### ***Salome***

In comparison to performances of the character of *Salome*, Herod offered examples of some strong recontextualising from students. More successful work tended to physicalise and personalise the list rather than regard it as a list of non-emotive objects. Less successful work was often characterised by a poor enactment of implied persons. Where a character is pleading with another, it is important for an audience to have a strong sense of both characters. There are many ways to create an implied person; from the subtlety of a glance towards them, to the physicality of reaching towards them or providing a specific space for them to inhabit.

Nearly one in five of the students who performed this male character were females. This character offered similar challenges to the character of Salome.

### **Female Chorus**

#### ***Lysistrata***

More successful students understood the physical, bawdy nature of the piece. They sought ways, although not always obvious in the specific text, to bring out the underlying sub-texts regarding gender roles and the relationships between the sexes. That is, although a monologue may deal with a specific instance, there may be a greater resonance which places the monologue in a broader context than the here-and-now. Students who achieve better results in the Context criterion tend to understand and to address this greater context. Less successful students tended to see the work as just another Greek tragedy and to play accordingly. Aristophanes provides virtually his own sub-genre or style of Greek theatre.

### **Male Chorus**

#### ***Lysistrata***

A number of students used masks and the other conventions of Greek theatre effectively. It is not vital for such a piece to be performed using all of the traditional conventions. It is important, however, for students to make specific decisions regarding style and conventions. Greek theatre conventions may be used, adapted or omitted, but there should be some clear reasoning behind these decisions – either through the performance itself or by way of the Statement of Intention. An Ancient Greek monologue provides the perfect opportunity for a student to score well in the Styles and Conventions criterion. This is an opportunity which should not be forgone without careful consideration.

### **Herald**

#### ***Agamemnon***

This character was generally not well performed, although there were some strong examples of recontextualisation. One of the strengths of Ancient Greek monologues is their universality, which frees them from specific context. The passage of years allows substantial flexibility for interpretation. The style of Greek poetic writing, similarly to Shakespeare, suggests a broad and freely interpretive approach.

### **Second Messenger**

#### ***Oedipus the King***

This was the most popular of the Greek choices. The challenge of this piece was to achieve storytelling that was clear and evocative. The appeal of the monologue may have been the very clear way the story was written and the poetic nature of the translation, which offered a broad scope for physicality, Greek theatre conventions, implied persons and recontextualisation.

The piece was equally popular with males and females. In previous years, the Ancient Greek monologues have provided not only an opportunity of non-gender specific portrayal but, most importantly, they have offered students vast opportunities for innovative interpretive choices and re-contextualisation.

## **Krapp**

### ***Krapp's Last Tape***

A challenge of this monologue was the choice of tape recording and playback. More successful students tended to choose very simple and straightforward solutions. Less successful students tended to apply most of their efforts to the mechanisms of playback. Ultimately, the piece was based on the absurd universe, styles and conventions of Samuel Beckett rather than the application of a prop. There were some innovative choices related to Krapp's age transformation. More successful work was generally characterised by a sense of real-time enactment rather than mechanical replay.

Fifteen percent of the students who performed this character were females. Although Krapp deals with some gender issues, the challenge of portrayal is in the style, the characterisation and the practical challenges of the tape and playback. These challenges may have appealed to some girls. Krapp was also a monologue that had no specific female equivalent.

## **Alf**

### ***One Day of the Year***

A number of students appropriately used the newspaper prop as a means to conceal lines. Regardless of the technicality, it is impossible for a student to score well for interpretation, context or working within monologue conventions when reading. Even when reading from a newspaper stipulated by the script, students should be familiar enough with the lines to look away and make suggested eye contact with implied persons. Generally, reading is anathema to the concept of monologue performance.

It was obvious that many students who attempted this monologue saw it as an easy option, requiring little research. Less successful work reflected little indication that students had read or understood the script. Students should note that it is generally very obvious to assessors when a student has not read and understood the play as a whole. More successful students not only explored the context of the script, but also researched the world of the 60s, which was so important to the sub-texts underpinning the content of the monologue.

## **Berenger**

### ***Rhinoceros***

Less successful work tended to be naturalistic; ignoring the styles and conventions of Ionesco's absurd universe. Most students included a reference to Ionesco's dramatic metaphor of Nazi conventionalism, but some of the poorer students saw the monologue as little more than a literal transformation into an animal.

Although students are free to interpret characters, and to play the opposite gender, they should be aware of the difficulty and complexity of changing the gender of a stipulated character – for instance, playing Berenger as a woman (rather than a girl playing Berenger as a man). Generally speaking, it is impossible to achieve such an interpretation or transformation without significant rewriting of the original script; with many implications for the performance of the play as a whole and the potential for compromising the original intention of the playwright. This is not to suggest that changing the gender of a character should never happen, but suffice to say that at VCE level, it is fraught with more difficulties than the average teacher or student could or should contemplate. The requirements of this examination are difficult enough without adding layers of challenge that are unexpected and, in all likelihood, not required.

## **A Woman Alone**

### ***A Woman Alone***

Many students worked with Commedia or physical clowning, which was most appropriate to the intention of the playwrights. Some students missed the comedy and the opportunity for physical business. Some students actually missed the fact that the piece, although depicting a tragic circumstance, provided significant scope for both verbal and physical comedy. Some students tended to use props poorly – either overusing them or being unfamiliar with them and therefore being unable to achieve comic or dramatic potential from a prop. A merely decorative prop has little place in a VCE monologue performance. The criteria point students towards the theatrical and dramatic use of props rather than mere set decoration. As with the Maniac in 2002, some of the more successful work could be characterised by a minimalist use of props.

A particular challenge of this monologue was the implied persons and the character's relationships with these implied persons. Generally, more successful work was characterised by a strong sense of these persons and the impact they were having on the Woman Alone. Although there is a level of equivalency, some monologues tend to be longer than others. In this instance, the manic energy of the character should have driven the lines to be delivered with speed and energy. Students who spent time with each pause, word or phrase were always going to find difficulty completing the piece in the required time.

## **Miss Woods**

### ***Morning Sacrifice***

This was a very difficult, static and slow monologue. The sensitivities were subtle; almost understated to an invisible degree. Contextualising the monologue was difficult to achieve through the content of the lines. More successful students used space, implied persons and subtle references to the greater context of the piece to evoke Miss Woods' universe. Small gestures, like the movement of a hand, a change of stance or a glance took on a greater significance in the more successful work. Less successful students tended to merely sit or stand and to recite the lines, with little understanding of their implications or how they affected Miss Woods or her audience.

## **Phillipa**

### ***All Souls***

This monologue provided for a huge breadth in interpretation and there were some very powerful individual interpretations. The monologue attracted many strong students who brought much interpretive innovation.

It was vital for students to make a decision about how they would interpret the rhymes. Some students used them as poetry, some as children's rhymes, some as song and some to even transform time and place. Less successful students tended to treat the rhymes little differently to the rest of the passage.

The hands were vital to an understanding of the passage. More successful students used the hands physically and metaphorically. Some even used them as transformative devices with almost mystical powers. Less successful students ignored any obvious reference to the hands.

More successful students understood that Phillipa inhabited another world beyond a physical existence. Less successful students found it difficult to represent anything other than a simple bag lady. As with *A Woman Alone*, the greater length of the piece did not allow for the extensive use of pausing or physicality.

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