

Theatre Studies: GA 2 Monologue Performance examination

GENERAL COMMENTS

In 2002, there was a broad and satisfactory range of results and interpretations and there has been a discernible improvement in the standard of monologue portrayal. The results were indicative of teachers being increasingly knowledgeable regarding the demands of the task. Teachers play an important and positive role in assisting students to choose the most appropriate monologue as well as playing a strong directorial role by acting as observer and informed critic.

Weapons and dangerous materials

Teachers should monitor all props and items which a student may wish to use in the monologue performance. Students are not permitted to bring any objects (including actual or imitation weapons) or substances deemed hazardous or illegal into the performance examination venue. The art of theatre is the art of interpretation based on suggestion and representation rather than presenting objects and situations as they actually are. Assessors do not need to see a gun or knife to know that a gun or knife is being portrayed.

Statement of Intention

Statements of Intention, when well written, pointed the assessors towards a deeper understanding of what the student was attempting to achieve. Where a student was being brave, adventurous and taking risks, a Statement of Intention acted as a kind of safety net, allowing an assessor to understand what the student had in mind, regardless of how well or how poorly the initial concept was carried out. Teachers should note that although Statements of Intention are compulsory, there is no grade or mark allocated to the Statement of Intention. The Statement of Intention is not designed to test the student but 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. Teachers also may assist students to identify the theoretical mechanisms that underpin 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 properties 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 transformation from the present 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 properties, 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
- an inability to engage the assessors through the transformation from the present of time or place.

SPECIFIC INFORMATION

The characters

Stepdaughter

This monologue was complex and challenging. The first challenge involved the detailed blocking of implied persons, who were such an integral part of the monologue. The range of emotions and responses provided an additional challenge. Although much of the required emotion was naturalistic on the surface, the play is steeped in absurdity, with the structure of a play within a play. This required a multi-layered response.

Less successful work tended to offer responses on only one level; most commonly a naturalistic response to the literal meaning of the text. More successful work reflected the broader context of the piece, capturing the immediate emotional universe as well as embracing the sense of the greater play. The universe of the play is not simple or one-dimensional. The piece is emotionally demanding, but the emotions needed to be set within the broader context.

As is common with translated works, there were two different translations of this monologue. Where one specific translation is not mandated, teachers and students are encouraged to check any possible variations with the VCAA before proceeding. Complications may arise with determining the specific start and conclusion of a monologue, and with slight variations in interpretation of meaning. The tone of one translation may also differ from the stipulated monologue. Different editions will always throw up slight variations of passages, but teachers are particularly alerted to 'interpretations' and 'variations' which do not purport to be the actual script. Copyright will usually determine that any version or variation to an original script must be labelled as such.

Concetta

On first reading, the passage seemed to stand alone, with little necessity for reference to the greater script. To truly capture the moment, it was necessary for students to understand the backgrounds of both Emma and Concetta. Only then, would the true nature of their relationship become clear.

Students who had a strong understanding of the entire text achieved the best grades. These students tended to not only show an understanding of the background of the characters, but also a comprehension of the themes of the play and the possible intentions of the playwright. More successful students tended to understand that the play was about more than race, culture or generational misunderstandings. Although the play offered considerations of all three, it did so with extremely complex characterisations and situations that were far from black and white. Although issues were complex and challenging, they also offered scope for humour. Although characters could be flawed, there was also a sense of respect and warmth in much of the writing.

Less successful students tended to ignore these complexities and simply play with the notion of cultural stereotypes; using the stereotype for the purposes of humour and/or derision. Although there are identifiable elements of cultural stereotyping throughout the play, the intention of the playwright was for a much more complex exploration of race and culture. As with the Stepdaughter, poorer students tended to capture the immediacy of the text, without reference to the greater universe of the play (both monologues were clear and strong; both, on the surface, stood alone; both however, required reference to the greater play to achieve their necessary complexity).

A literal translation of the text demanded that Concetta have a broken leg and be unable to stand for the entire duration of the monologue. Many students found something apt for Concetta to do with her hands, such as peeling potatoes, which would be appropriate for a sitting position. Some students chose a non-naturalistic approach which allowed Concetta to stand and dance when she referred to her past self – as if in a kind of flash-back or dream sequence. This approach may not have reflected the specific original intention of the playwright, but could certainly be categorised as a legitimate and appropriate interpretive decision working within monologue conventions.

Queen Margaret

This monologue tended to attract more successful students. The complexity of the language, the situation and the character suggested that the monologue was not to be taken lightly. As with much of Shakespeare, there was no simple or superficial approach that would have sufficed. Adding to the complexity of the verse and the challenge of age was the necessity to construct specific implied persons and suggest appropriate relationships. As with the Stepdaughter and Concetta, the complexity of the monologue could not be achieved without reference to the context of the greater play. The play *Richard III* is strongly character and plot driven. Therefore, the contexts of character and plot should be evident in the monologue. The emotions elicited by Margaret are a direct reflection of all that is occurring around her. More successful students tended to capture the world in which she lived and the circumstances with which she was desperately trying to cope. Once students understood the mood and the dire circumstances, they were free to interpret and play within a specific context. With some Shakespeare, it is difficult to play with context, but *Richard III*, because of its clear and rich plot, lends itself readily to recontextualisation.

Atlanta

In 2002, this was the most popular choice. Poorer grades were characterised by a propensity towards playing teenage angst, regardless of the stated age of the character. This aspect may have attracted some students. The ability to capture the complex situation and implied person characterised the work of more successful students. Students who chose this monologue because they believed that on the surface it appeared simple missed much of the complexity of the play and the monologue. Some of the least successful work actually failed to identify that the character was, in fact, passed from the world of the living. Quite simply, these students had failed to read or to understand the play.

It is obvious that some students tended to be attracted to what appeared, at first reading, to be simple, straightforward and contemporary. A case could be made that these are the very choices that some students should avoid because they provide little support structure for the student. Shakespeare, Brecht, Absurdism and Classical Greeks may depend on an element of research, but it is research that is easily accomplished and generally readily understood by students. What some students tend to fail to understand is the complexity inherent in the seemingly mundane and straightforward. All theatre requires research, interpretation and the construction of subtexts and context. The failure of many less successful students tends to be based on this basic misunderstanding. They know Shakespeare requires background consideration and research. They simply fail to see that David Williamson or Joanna Murray-Smith require equal, if not more, background consideration. On stage, reality does not exist. Every aspect of theatrical reality must be considered and constructed. The most seemingly real is as artificial as the 'artiest' artifice. Shakespeare, Brecht, the Absurdist and Classical Greeks offer situations that are no more or less real than the most contemporary of playwrights. Students who understand this fact are on the first steps to succeeding in the monologue task.

The Old Man

This was a difficult and not particularly popular choice. The portrayal of extreme old age is difficult to achieve, even working non-naturalistically. Many students found difficulty coming to terms with the context of the speech, the subtlety of the meaning and the irony inherent in the text. The monologue was a good vehicle and opportunity for strong students to explore style and conventions. Absurdism is a difficult and complex style based on the concept of communication and lack of communication. A prerequisite for a higher grade was a solid understanding of Absurdism as a style, along with its associated conventions.

An

This piece provided an opportunity for some students to produce some exceptional work. This was not a popular choice, but students who chose this monologue tended to be strong. An understanding of the historical, social and cultural background and the broader context of this piece were necessary prerequisites to achieving a successful result. There was support from teachers and students for offering an Asian character. In such choices, there is always a danger of stereotype. This danger exists for all monologues, including Queen Margaret, Concetta or even a Greek Chorus. Such choices reinforce the necessity for sensitivity to, and understanding of, other cultures.

King Richard

This was not a popular choice. The monologue provided a balanced range of grades. Some of the poorer grades were achieved because of a student's inability to come to terms with the complexity of language. The contexts and subtexts of this piece were dense and complex. This was a difficult scene from a difficult play. As with much of Shakespeare, there was much opportunity to pass comment on the play and display a greater understanding by altering the original context. This was generally achieved in a successful manner, even by those students who struggled to impart the intended meaning of the specific passage.

Maniac

This was a very popular choice. Timing was a particular challenge with this monologue. Where stage business and physicality are so detailed and complex, students simply do not have time for extensive verbal pausing. Some students had not adequately timed their pieces. Some teachers and students mistakenly believed that they would be allowed to finish, regardless of time. The task clearly stipulates that seven minutes is the maximum time allowable. The more successful work tended to be well timed and constructed and effortlessly captured the entire physical scope of the task within the time limit.

The Player

This monologue offered the opportunity for some exceptional work. It was a very popular choice that produced some innovative interpretations. It was obvious from the less successful work that some students had not read the play. Quite simply, those who read the play and had a detailed and thorough understanding of its style and content tended to produce strong work. Subtext, comedy and intended meaning were important aspects of this monologue. Playing with and understanding style and conventions were aspects that tended to exemplify the better interpretations.

The Announcer

This was a very popular choice that tended to be supportive of students throughout various grade levels. There was a strong variation in the range of responses and some very innovative approaches, including such innovations as puppets and some complex staging concepts. Some interpretations remained very true to Brecht and his intentions. The best work captured the implied persons utilising Brechtian style and conventions.

Such a choice of monologue may at first seem difficult to a student with little understanding of Brechtian theory. Producing work that offers a strong theoretical basis to the assessors, however, may considerably support performing students. In this way, assessors may reward students for their thinking and understanding rather than their innate talents as a performer, which may at times be somewhat lacking. In other words, sometimes the seemingly most difficult choices are actually the easiest to achieve for some students because the challenge is clear and logical rather than aesthetic, artistic, poetic or nebulous. Some students simply work better on concrete tasks, even though this at first might seem the more difficult choice. It is common for these students to miss the inherent complexity of a seemingly simple contemporary piece. It may be better for less successful students to avoid the apparently simple and attempt the clearly difficult where a plan of action may be more logically constructed.

Chorus

As is usual with the classic Greek monologues, this choice created a full range of responses. Generally, in Greek classics, narrative and specific meaning are clear and straightforward. This allows for extensive opportunities for interpretation and recontextualisation. The less successful work tended towards a recitation of the immediate passage without reference to the world of the play or a sense of any greater context. Recitation may capture the immediate meaning of the specific passage. Isolated from the world of the play; however, a passage can become superficial and lacking in necessary subtext. The length of the piece created a challenge. As with all such longer pieces, students were required to adjust the timing, pauses and physical stage business appropriately. Rushing the entire text would not provide the solution, nor would emphasising every phrase. It is important for students to identify where time must be taken and where time must be saved. This is an important aspect of the monologue challenge.

Prologue

This was not a popular choice. As with the Brecht, some students may have been put off by the obvious necessity for research into the style and language. There was some outstanding work that was indicative of teachers and students having researched the play, the period, the issues and the playwright extensively. The more successful work captured the period, as well as the humour of the piece. Some of the more outstanding work displayed a mastery of style by recontextualising the piece while retaining appropriate conventions and meaning. Less successful students tended to put on a costume and recite, displaying little understanding of the greater world of the piece. Students giving more time to hair and costume than research and rehearsal have clearly missed the point of the monologue examination.